TENDER STRUGGLES: GEOGRAPHY, AFFECT, AND MODES OF POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. LATINA/O FICTION

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This dissertation examines the role that feelings play in shaping forms of critique, politics and knowledge with a particular emphasis on geography. In articulating these ideas, I turn to the work of contemporary Latina/o writers whose writing provides critical insights and support for questions about how space, politics and knowledge intersect with emotions: Cristina García, Alex Espinoza, Ernesto Quiñonez, Helena María Viramontes, H.G. Carrillo and Manuel Muñoz. Through their attention to space as well as affect in everyday life, I argue that these writers engage in a tender mode of narrative relation that provides critical insight into the ways in which emotions operate in both the re-production and critical deconstruction of structures of relation. These caring narratives, I assert, model and enact a radical form of struggle with and for vulnerability: that is, an openness to being affected by others. I enhance these arguments about affect, relationality and modes of struggle throughout my dissertation by thinking about these ideas from my experiences with teaching, activism and interdisciplinary scholarship. In an attempt to engage in an openness and attentiveness like the tender struggles it theorizes, this dissertation moves through various discussions that are critical to both academic scholarship and social justice activism: from neoliberal

transformations of ethnic urban spaces, to practices of food sovereignty in the ghetto, to the politics of care and gender in social movements, to the potential for cross-cultural coalition organizing through an avowal of vulnerability.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Oscar Omar Figueredo received his B.A. in Spanish and Comparative Literature with an individualized minor in Latin American Cultures and Societies from the University of Rochester in 2008. He took an M.A. in Hispanic Literature in 2012 and completed his Ph.D. in Hispanic Literature in 2016 at Cornell University.

For my mother, Margarita C. Figueredo

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PREFACE:

ACTING WITH/IN FEAR

I.

Before I begin this dissertation on the role of affect in the mediation of modes of relation in contemporary U.S. Latina/o literature, I want to offer a personal experience of tender struggles. In March 2013, my partner Nancy Morales and I were arrested for publicly challenging the authority of the U.S. Border Patrol in Brownsville, Texas.[1] Confronted by Border Patrol officers asking us about our citizenship and immigration status as we prepared to board a domestic flight, we refused to answer or cooperate in their interrogation and insisted that we be allowed to continue on our journey unimpeded. Supported in part by a recent wave of similar citizen challenges at interior border checkpoints,[2] we were convinced that this (in)action was well within our rights as citizens confronted by Border Patrol officers outside the context of an official port of entry. Though we knew that Border Patrol agents have the legal authority to briefly detain us in order to ask such questions (a violation of the

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[1] See democracynow. "EXCLUSIVE: U.S. Citizens Arrested at Airport for Refusing Border Patrol Questions." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 27 Mar. 2013. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.

[2] For some coverage of this by news media, see Cindy Casares's "Border Patrol Takes 'No' for an Answer at Internal Checkpoints." *The Texas Observer*. 7 Mar. 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2013; and, Debbie

fourth amendment that the U.S. Supreme Court judged reasonable for the purposes of enforcing border security)[3], we also knew that we have the right to refuse to cooperate.[4] We hadn't planned to get arrested.

Nathan's "Challenging the Checkpoints." *LatinoUSA*. National Public Radio. 10 Oct. 2014. Web.

[3] The relevant case for this authority and, simultaneously, for our seemingly confusing action is *U.S. v. Martínez-Fuerte* (1976), in which the court found that, although permanent Border Patrol checkpoints within the U.S. do constitute a seizure otherwise prohibited by the U.S. Constitution's fourth amendment, they are consistent with the Constitution insofar as they are limited in scope. That is, weighed against the government's interest in curbing unauthorized migration and/or movement of materials into the U.S., the regular, brief detention of passing motorists without a warrant or reasonable suspicion for the sole purpose of inquiring about one's citizenship or migratory status constitutes a tolerable violation. Yet, what the court could not condone was the state's compulsion of detained individuals to participate in this questioning. (Doing so is tantamount to providing the questioning agent with permission to conduct a search or seizure at their discretion.) Witness here then the seeming contradiction brought about by the decision in *Martínez-Fuerte*: that agents are endowed with the authority to conduct brief seizures at interior checkpoints without having to secure a warrant, while citizens are still protected by the fourth amendment from having to submit to them; agents can ask their questions, but citizens are not compelled to answer them.

[4] The airport's official name is somewhat misleading. At the time of our (in)action, there were no regular international flights scheduled from the airport and attempts to provide such a service have never lasted particularly long. More importantly, however, Nancy and I were not entering the U.S. from abroad; we were momentarily detained from continuing to travel freely throughout and within the interior of the U.S. (specifically, the airport building). We encountered the agents as we approached the Transportation Security Administration's mandatory pre-boarding security screening area, where we would be obligated to identify ourselves (i.e. disclose our names, but not our citizenship/immigration status). In other words, the encounter occurred within the U.S. and therefore was subject to various limitations that are meant to honor and respect the authority of the

Nancy and I simply wanted to travel without having to prove our right to do so beforehand; we wanted to travel without any unnecessary or unwarranted obstruction. In part, then, our (in)action was intended to highlight an instance of the countless colonial encounters that take place within the occupied borderlands between state agents and brown bodies. In these encounters, the colonized is subject to interrogation and threatened with violence if they refuse to submit to the colonizer's authority. Opacity, as a difference that cannot be reduced or translated, becomes suspect to the logic of the border guard whose job it is to ensure transparency. Thus, the other significant intention we had in performing this action-that-is-not-an-action, or refusal, was to occupy or inhabit the opacity and vulnerability of the encounter as a political act.[5] Rather than seeking an escape from the feelings of fear and indeterminacy that this encounter generates, we attempted to remain in the company of these emotions, as it were; to linger in the condition of suspension. We could have "easily" answered the questions of the officers by claiming our citizenship. (In fact, I have done so many times before and after that March 2013 encounter.) We are both citizens and had we simply accepted and cooperated with the interrogation, we would likely have been able to board our flight on

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U.S. Constitution in regulating the relationship between citizens and the state.

time like everyone else. But, at stake in accepting this "minor" intrusion, was our degree of opacity-as-freedom, our independence from a system that determines our legitimacy through criteria we have not previously agreed to. Therefore, in refusing to answer the question, we refused to occupy the structures of power (e.g. citizenship) and instead chose to dwell in the liminal space of opacity (un-claimed citizenship or migratory status).

II.

My encounters with the Border Patrol, even today, have always been colored by fear. Until I was in my late teens, I did not have a social security number nor was my presence in the U.S. officially "documented." I was born in Mexico and moved to Brownsville as an infant, so I only ever remember this as my home. Although my mother is a U.S. citizen, the complexities of the immigration legal system impeded her ability to secure the recognition of my own U.S. citizenship. Therefore, for about the first sixteen years of my life, I did not have the privilege of U.S. citizenship.

Brownsville is a small city—often referred to, somewhat disparagingly, as a "small border town"—located at the southernmost tip of the state. From a U.S. geographic perspective, you can't go any further south or down than Brownsville. In this sense, it might as well

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[5] See, Édouard Glissant's "For Opacity." *Poetics of Relation*. Trans.

be the end of the world. From this perspective, the only way "out" of Brownsville is up, north: to Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Dallas and beyond. Most of my mom's aunts and uncles settled around the Houston area, near Pearland, so we often drove there to visit. Other times we might drive to San Antonio for a weekend vacation. U.S. Route 77 was the highway that always took us out of Brownsville's flatness towards the gentle hills of south central Texas or the taller, greener trees of east Texas. It was the highway that the bus drivers took during school field trips to Six Flags Fiesta Texas in San Antonio or to state-level competitions in Austin, Houston or Dallas. It is precisely this function of the highway that accounts for the Border Patrol's siting of one of its interior checkpoints along U.S. 77, near the town of Sarita.

Fear of what? Fear of being detained and taken and deported back to Mexico and not being allowed to return home. The fear of being taken away from your home and your family and everything that you know. The fear of having everything taken from you. The fear of being unable to travel freely, to move forward. On the bus with my school trip, I just wanted to go to Fiesta Texas or to the state competition in Dallas or in Austin; with my mom, I just wanted to go to Six Flags Astroland, to see our family in Pearland. The Border Patrol

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Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U Michigan Press, 2006.

checkpoint represented a threat to my ability to do these things, a threat to my ability to continue moving forward and growing and developing. The fear of being stuck in time and place. The fear and shame of having done something wrong, of being guilty. The shame of being different. These are the ways that I think of my own vulnerability, my own openness and susceptibility to being affected. I was tender and vulnerable in that encounter and in all previous encounters. My body feels somewhat tense, in heightened sense of expectation. Exactly what is anticipated is unknown or unclear and perhaps adds to the emotion. It is a feeling of suspension, of being in-between, in-the-air. You don't know if you're going to fly or if you're going to come crashing down. You're being held up in a precarious position by a series of contradictory (or at least seemingly contradictory) norms: you have a human right to dignity and respect, but the police violate these too often; you have the right to travel freely as a human but state's can/have create(d) a regime of laws that limits the mobility of people; the U.S. has enacted several "free trade" agreements that facilitate and encourage the movement of goods, natural resources, manufactured products, and capital from one territory to another, but at the same time the U.S. puts in place some of the strictest barriers to migration within its borders; the U.S. touts freedom as a fundamental human right and promises to support or

deliver it anywhere across the world, but it places strict quotas on the number of people who have access to these on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, national origin, political ideology, etc., thus rendering these as privileges rather than rights; you have certain rights as a citizen but these will not always protect you; you have the right to remain silent, but if you don't say anything, this can be used against you as incriminating evidence; the Border Patrol has the authority to briefly detain people at interior checkpoints for the limited purpose of determining their nationality and citizenship status, their destination or their trip's origins, as well as anything else that a person may willingly consent to, including a warrantless or suspicionless search of their bodies, and belongings, but citizens have a constitutional right to refuse or decline to answer any of these questions (i.e., they are under no obligation to answer them); the police and the Border Patrol have the authority to lie, invent, to equivocate, to intimidate and harass, but the people have the obligation to be truthful in everything they say to such an authority, under the threat of penalty or punishment enforced by the law/court. The suspension I speak of is a mode of anticipation though it is unclear what exactly is being anticipated other than an end to the anticipation. Most people feel uncomfortable with such a state of suspension, of in-betweenness, of being up-in-the-air. Be it for better

or worse, many would prefer to be on the ground, as it were: here or there, now or then. At the moment of encounter, those of us that prefer determinacy to indeterminacy, actualization to suspension, tend to simply answer the question so that we can move on, so we may be released from suspension. I have answered the question for years believing that doing so would relieve me of the state of suspension, the state of in-betweenness, the anticipatory. But that has not necessarily been the case. The encounters never end. The encounter can be relived and experienced far away form the actual checkpoints, with or without the actual presence of the Border Patrol. It can happen when I'm filling out official or legal documentation, it can happen at the lunch line, it can happen during a conversation with friends. I don't think I have ever been fully released from that encounter, from all of those encounters.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: MY OWN LOVE LETTER

I.

In "An Open Love Letter to Folks of Color," queer black feminist Mia McKenzie declares: "POC [People of Color], I love you because you are fierce. Because you are strong. Because you are hella resilient. Because despite living in a country that finds some new way every single day to tell you that you are less, you somehow continue to be more and more and more." "I love you, too," she continues, "for the way, despite all of this, you continue to love each other." I'd like to submit this dissertation as my own love letter: to myself, to the writers I read herein and their works, to my family and for all the lives that these works attempt to honor.

"Tender Struggles" is an attempt to honor, through both recognition and practice, the particular mode of being, knowing and feeling that I see at work in the writings of Alex Espinoza, Ernesto Quiñonez, Cristina García, Helena María Viramontes, Manuel Muñoz and H.G. Carrillo. I use this conceptual phrase to describe what I think these writers depict in their stories. Much of the works, as other readers have observed, focus on the everyday lives of Latinas/os struggling to survive against many different sorts of pressures, many of which are oppressive but also ambiguous. But, importantly, I have

also developed this phrase to make reference to the particular way in which these writers, I argue, produce those stories: with tenderness. "Tender struggles," then, names the efforts one makes to be open (affectively) to the impressions of others as a matter of ethics, politics and epistemology. That is, I suggest that this openness implies a particular kind of responsibility to others, it animates a specific form of critique and also of knowing.

But it is also meant to index the difficulty experienced in making such efforts. To be open to the impressions (physical, psychical, affective) of others is not necessarily an easy task, especially as it entails a willful acceptance or submission to the fact that one is not in complete control over one's own self. To willingly submit ourselves to others in this way is to let go or abandon certain notions or convictions of power and sovereignty (over oneself and over others). Although tenderness (willful for not) can make one open to engendering connections it is also a state in which one is susceptible to being impressed negatively by others. In fact, as philosopher Erinn Gilson shows in *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (2014), this unavoidable aspect is what makes any ethics or politics based on such openness both powerful and difficult to sustain. And in social, cultural, political, economic and historical contexts where this relationality or exposure of tenderness is understood only negatively and/or where the ideal

mode of being is predicated upon independence/non-relationality, this degree of openness or inter-subjective malleability should be avoided rather than cultivated out of a (perhaps misguided) sense that this will provide a sense of protection necessary to ensure continued development or growth. Thus, in these contexts, tenderness is a very difficult ideal to work for: it is a struggle.

It is certainly a struggle for people of color (including writers and academics) in the U.S to willingly expose themselves to the impingements of others and/or to even acknowledge one's own exposure.[6] This is definitely the case for the lives of the characters in the works of Espinosa, Quiñones, García, Carrillo, Muñoz and Viramontes: women, immigrants, queer Latina/os, and poor/working class Latinas/os. In these stories, I will argue, these writers portray a struggle both with tenderness (as an exposure to potential harm/injury) and for tenderness (as an openness to potential connections with others).

At the same time, however, part of what my dissertation focuses on is making the claim that the way in which the stories are written is itself part of this struggle with and for openness. Here, in part, I mean that the writing itself is an attempt to occupy a site of vulnerability or

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[6] See Antonio Viego's Introduction to *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies* (Duke 2007) as well as Anne Cheng's *The*

to inhabit tenderness (with respect to the characters and worlds in the texts) and that this produces a demand for potential readers to do the same. I suggest that there are particular descriptions and narrative decisions made by the authors that enact or engage in an effort to open the interaction between the text and its writer, as well as between the text and its reader. Again, this is a somewhat risky endeavor (on the part of the writers) insofar as such an openness is not guaranteed to result in a positive outcome. But this struggle is laudable insofar as it challenges dominant paradigms of vulnerability, interdependency and the interpersonal constitution of subjectivity as values or aspects to be disavowed or devalued.

In an attempt to honor those tender struggles portrayed in these narratives and in the practices used to create them, I also hope to submit this work as one more among them. Writing this has definitely been a difficult process (as is perhaps typical and expected of most, if not all, dissertations). This work has only been possible through my own embrace or purposive avowal of my own vulnerability. Here, in part, I am referring to the personal reflections and observations I share throughout the dissertation. But I am also perhaps more aware of some of the struggles involved in allowing this to be the voice that addresses you. Much of the writing I have chosen to include and

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Melancholy of Race (Oxford 2000) for discussions of the problems

submit as my dissertation was never meant to be shared, either out of concern for the kind of voice it employed (my own) or the ideas that it presented. This, then, is one way of introducing what is/are "Tender Strugles".

II.

Another important way to think about or understand "Tender Struggles" is as an exercise in thinking about the politics and ethics of critical discourse and consciousness. What is an appropriate method of communicating a critical story? How can stories deliver or carry knowledge that is "critical," in both the sense that it is a critique of something, but also in the sense that it asks questions for the purpose of learning? These questions are variations of one of the principle concerns I had in mind as I began this project: how do Latina/o writers produce a critical knowledge of space and geography (its dynamic social, historical and political aspects) through the process of writing itself? That is, how does fiction generally, and Latina/o fiction in particular, function as a (different) mode of knowing and engaging critically with the world?

These questions found their origins in my frustrations reading accounts from the field of critical geography and planning about the ways in which space is socially produced and how subjects, too, are

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posed by (minoritarian) identities of resistance centered on loss.

simultaneously constituted through space. The writings of critical planner Edward Soja and Marxist economist David Harvey have been very influential in this respect, as they are two of the most important voices (since the 1980s) calling for a greater attention to space and geography, alongside time and history, as key terms and dimensions of social theory and analysis. Though there is hardly any problem with incorporating time and history into a Marxist social theory, both Soja and Harvey have long argued that a spatial dimension needs to be added to historical materialism, for "The constitution of society is [both] spatial and temporal, social existence is made concrete in geography and history" (Soja 127). In other words, our relations (including gender, class, sexuality and race) are not only materialized historically, but also in the very organization of space. Cities and urban spaces are perhaps the most obvious examples of this materialization of social relations. For instance, one might think of the enclosure of poor and working class Latina/o communities in urban spaces (Diaz) or the mutually-constitutive relation between the spatialization of these communities and the siting of environmentally hazardous industries (Pulido) or even of prisons (Gilmore). Rather than seeing the urbanism of U.S. Latina/o communities as natural or their concentration in industrially-zoned areas as a consequence of their socio-political status, a social theory inflected with an awareness of

the production of space reveals the ways in which the social, economic and political status of Latina/o communities (i.e. their relation with other communities) is one that must be continually reproduced through space. As Soja notes, "Under advanced capitalism," for instance, " the organization of space becomes predominantly related to the reproduction of the dominant system of social relations. Simultaneously, the reproduction of these dominant social relations becomes the primary basis for the survival of capitalism itself" (91). This is not to say that space is totally passive in this equation, but rather that it exists in a dialectical relationship with the social, a "socio-spatial dialectic." Neither do Harvey nor Soja limit this theory of capitalism's need to produce space for the sake of survival to observations of the organization of cities and urban centers. In this theorization of the social production of space, no geography is outside of the process: cities, rural spaces, nature and ecologies are all discursively and materially re-produced in this dialectical fashion. Neil Smith's writings about gentrification in global urbanization trends and especially his insight into the fundamental role of settler-colonialist discourses and imaginaries in such projects have also been important for highlighting the ways in which questions of race are always, already inscribed into the politics of urban "revitalization" (1996; 2002).

In reading some of this work I have often found myself feeling as though I am already familiar with much of what these scholars point out about the ways in which space works and is worked upon. This familiarity with such questions, however, comes from reading novels, short stories, poems and other cultural productions of various queer, feminist and writers of color. In thinking about concepts of commoning and the right to the city, for instance, I am often reminded of the "Albaricoqueros, cerezos, nogales" and "Espinaca, verdolagas, yerbabuena" that grow "under the fake windsounds of the open lanes" in Lorna Dee Cervantes's poem "Freeway 280" (39). The herbs and plants, known only by their names in Spanish, suggest the endurance of a Mexican community and culture despite the raised scar of modernity: the freeway. Where the freeway attempts to sanitize and treat space as dead, the cerezos and nogales manifest the ways in which the freeway has threatened, but not extinguished, the life of the geography. And in this space beneath the freeway, "Viejecitas come here with paper bags to gather greens," (39) demonstrating a form of 20th-century commoning. Cervantes's poem thus reveals the way in which the freeway is the result of a particular mode of spatial production that is tied to generating and enforcing a specific mode of social relations wherein the lanes not only disrupt but also reroute life trajectories.

Representations of the botánica shop provide another critical exploration of the relationship between Latina/o communities and space. Botánicas are common to many Latina/o communities throughout the country, especially those of Mexican and Caribbean descent, offering spiritual items like votive candles and prayer cards, as well as herbal-based remedies for common ailments. In this sense, one might characterize botánicas as spaces that challenge the institution of medicine or healthcare as a practice of science and modernity removed from spiritual, religious or "natural" (plant-based) realms. The healing sought within these spaces and through these practices is one in which an individual's faith is always a central, rather than peripheral, part of the process. In Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints* and Ernesto Quiñonez's *Chango's Fire*, the representation of the botánica is focused on the degree to which this space functions as a center for Latina/o communities. Considered collectively, these representations of the botánica reveal the somewhat arbitrary, but critical role played by distinctions between science/faith, modern/non-modern and authentic/inauthentic. Thus, in Chapter Two, I focus my attention on the ways in which these literary representations of the botánica as a hybrid commercial-spiritual-community space provide a critical lens for discussions of Latina/o identity within a political-economic context

of increasing modernization and marketization.

Clyde Woods's concept of a "blues epistemology" as a form of critical geographic consciousness (2005; 2007) has been resonant with my own desire to read Latina/o fiction as a place where analyses of the socio-spatial dynamic are also generated. And, of course, Raúl Villa's *Barrio Logos* (2000), Mary Pat Brady's *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies* (2002) and Eric Ávila's *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* (2004) have already done some of this important work and thus were also of critical use for outlining the deep ideological engagements that Chicana/o literature and culture have historically had with the politics of space and its production. As Brady notes, in contrast to many Euro-American social theorists that Soja and Harvey critique for ignoring geography and space in their analyses of social relations, "Chicana/os have been considering space, taking it seriously, not simply as something to produce, but as something to understand, since, as it were, our inception," given the ways that displacement and dislocation have been constitutive processes of the Americas (9). More importantly, Brady continues, "Chicana literature offers an important theoretics of space…that unlike many space theories suggests the relevance of aesthetics, of 'the literary mode of knowing' for understanding the intermeshing of the spatial and the social" (6). Chicana literature, Brady argues, "illustrates and enlarges the shaping

force of narrative in the production of space, highlighting the discursiveness of space, its dependence on cultural mediation" (8). This is not to say that space is merely or predominantly a discursive construct bereft of a material reality, but rather an acknowledgement of the ways in which understandings of space and its production are governed by particular narratives and grammatical structures (7-8).

In reading this particular body of work mixing questions about (popular) culture, geography and epistemology, I became particularly interested in finding a more specific understanding of literature as a means of producing a critical geographic epistemology or a socio-spatial consciousness. I was less interested in reading Latina/o literature for *what* it said with regard to space and its production and much more intrigued by asking questions about *how* this particular knowledge or awareness is produced or shared through the process of fiction – a narrative form whose practice has generated competing and conflicting arguments about its veracity, authenticity and/or loyalty to notions of "truth" and "reality." Thus, "Tender Struggles" is a theorization of a critical (geographic) consciousness that emerges out of an openness through fiction to others and their affects on one's self. This mode of narrative relation provides insights into the production of space and the ways in which one might develop a consciousness of that process.

I have focused on affect and vulnerability because I've long been suspicious of fiction that feels didactic or prescriptive, or by writing that feels as though it is simply a means to an end rather than something to be valued in its own right. By this, I do not mean to count myself among those that argue that fiction should have no bearing upon or engagement with reality or the social world. I believe that all kinds of literature or fiction writing (even those that are motivated by an aversion to such entanglements) are always already engaged in or with the social world. Still, not all fiction is written the same, even those works that may be said to have been written as a mode of critical engagement. To the extent that all fiction is political, it does not necessarily follow that all fiction is political *in the same way*. Therefore, one of the motivations for "Tender Struggles" is to trace new connections between form, politics, ethics and epistemology. This is a dissertation that focuses on aesthetic forms, but not necessarily for the sake of arguing in favor of one particular tradition over another. In fact, I am motivated by the very opposite: to seek an appreciation of the multiplicity of aesthetic forms and political modes, against the impulse to name or identify *the* truly beautiful object or *the* final (critical) analysis. (This of course has much to do with my exposure to poststructuralist thought in feminism, ethnography, literature, science and politics.)

To say just a bit more about how I understand the relationship between Latina/o literature and a geographic consciousness or epistemology, I should say that the reason why I'm suspicious or skeptical of "didactic" kinds of fiction is because it seems that these kinds of writing participate in an epistemology and politics that presumes a stable truth, including a stable political subject endowed with critical agency. Moreover, if I say that this type of literature attempts to teach the reader something, I am not necessarily suggesting that literature should not or cannot perform such a function. I am, indeed, committed to understanding fiction as a mode of knowing and thinking critically about reality and the social world. However, I'm particularly conscious of the fact that there are many different ways of teaching. Furthermore, we can distinguish and differentiate between these various modes of teaching by thinking about the distinct politics implied or served by each pedagogical method. Perhaps one of the most familiar arguments about the politics of different educational models is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he makes the claim for dialogue as central to a pedagogy of liberation, where knowledge and liberation are not things that can be simply transferred from one person (or vessel) to another; but, rather, that knowledge and liberation emerge as a result of mutual participation in a sustained conversation. For Freire, liberation

is achieved through this practice of dialogic exchange; therefore, it is not something that can be (simply, if at all) given (or taken). While I can't say that Freire's notions of dialogic pedagogy are what drove this skepticism of didactic literature on my part, it has provided me with some useful language for explaining this aspect of my work.[7]

All of this, then, has led me to the particular narratives I have chosen because tenderness necessarily implies an unknowing or uncertain position. If one is open to others, one cannot fully control or pre-determine the effects of these interactions. Thus, in this position one cannot make a claim to absolute knowledge. For this reason, I am interested in writing that explores space and its production from this kind of position, and that is attuned to different ways of knowing space. The narratives I have chosen to explore in this dissertation do not necessarily make any truth claims about space, politics, etc. But this does not mean that they are not involved in a particular kind of politics or epistemology. Instead, these works and their writers are very much invested in what I call a tender mode of narrative engagement, honoring and exploring the ways in which we are constituted through our affective relations to one another and to various other objects. This, then, is part of my answer to the question I

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[7] As I mentioned above, poststructuralist writings about science, objectivity and truth have also been highly influential in this regard.

began my project with: How do Latina/o writers produce a critical knowledge of space and geography through the process of writing itself? Alex Espinosa, Cristina García, Ernesto Quiñonez, Helena Viramontes, Manuel Muñoz and H.G. Carrillo, I argue, are contemporary Latina/o writers whose work is critically engaged with the ways in which affect, feelings and emotions structure our everyday experiences including space and geography. Their writing interrogates and explores the world through an attentiveness to emotions and affects. This affective attentiveness, I want to argue, requires one to inhabit a tender position (which is itself a fraught struggle). These tender struggles take feelings and emotions seriously, as artifacts of social, political, historical, spatial and economic relations. To listen to, experience and be with our feelings is a way to realize the ways in which we are related to others and to different objects. This affective attentiveness, moreover, animates a particular form of politics that cannot assume any easy notions of an inside/outside or for/against. This is where I would like to draw a connection to Chela Sandoval's concept of a "differential oppositional consciousness." This mode of consciousness is a methodology of the oppressed in that it "functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the

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Especially, Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, James Clifford, Renato

transmission of power" (58). To be tender, to inhabit tenderness is to remain open to the affects of others, to being affected by others, and therefore one cannot assume a critical distance from others without acknowledging that this is only possible in relation to others. What I mean to suggest by this is that one cannot assume a critical position against an/other without simultaneously implicating oneself as the object of that same critique. This acknowledgment is crucial to a politics and epistemology animated by tenderness.

III.

Tenderness complicates modes or accounts of critique that privilege a stable subject with agency to perform critique, as well as challenging notions of critique that assume the stability of righteousness. In this way, I see the particular mode or form of critique generated by an openness to the affects of others as similar to Chela Sandoval's "differential oppositional consciousness." My understanding of "tender struggles" is inspired in great part by the work I see being performed in and through the writing of the authors studied here, but it also takes critical cues from activists' understandings of the motivations for and methods of critique. For instance, in her essay "Love in a Time of Calling Out," Julie, a white transgender woman (MTF), seeks to address challenges against

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Rosaldo, among many others.

demands for individual accountability (through the action of "calling out") within social movements by sharing the difficulty she experiences in having to decide to "call out" family members who fail to acknowledge her gender transition, especially her elderly grandfather. "When the action of 'calling out' within social justice spheres is questioned," she explains, "I think of my grandfather. He has good intentions. He's trying really hard. We have a long, loving history. But because I can't call him out and he can't fully change, our relationship is still damaged." By approaching this issue through reflection on these personal experiences, Julie makes a very important point about the kinds of emotional and social investments implied in "calling out" as a critical practice for social justice activists. While some argue that calling people out on their privileges, or demanding them to "check" their own privileges, is either divisive or too narrowly focused on privilege as such, Julie clarifies that pointing out privilege or the ignorance borne of it is not a matter of policing each others' behaviors out of some sense of righteousness but is a way of acknowledging already existing tensions so as to prevent future injury:

> It's not just that privilege in and of itself is problematic. It's not that we [activists] have checklists for "How Things Should Be," created by aloof academics and faceless nonprofits. We call people on their microaggressions, on

> their ignorance, on their privilege because they hurt. They fucking hurt. And we don't want to keep being hurt. We want to be safe.

In other words, according to Julie, the practice of calling out is not just about righteousness (and much less about political correctness); it is a critical practice motivated by an urgency to acknowledge real injuries and to work towards healing. Many times, it is precisely the lack of acknowledgment of a person's injury that hurts. Thus, the acknowledgment implied in the act of calling out is a step towards healing. "Because even if it might be acrimonious at the time, it's not about tearing us apart. It's about creating a space where we can stay together" (Julie). Checking privilege is always oriented towards building a more just and healthy relationship. It is also an implicit acknowledgment of one's vulnerability to the affects of others, and a demand for them to make the same.

Public intellectual Cornel West makes a similar comment regarding different modes of and motivations for such critical observations. During the height of a "beef" between black writer-directors Spike Lee and Tyler Perry over the extent to which each other's work critically challenges racist stereotypes of African Americans, West addressed the need for both critique and unity. Like Lee, West too has his critical reservations about the work produced by

Perry. But, West clarifies, he makes his critique of Perry "in the name of love of brother Tyler. I love that brother…That's why I don't condemn him, I lovingly critique him" (Free). In other words, those that would critique Perry or his work, if they are truly committed to their critiques, must be similarly invested in helping Perry make better work, or in West's words to "grow up." "He's gonna grow up," promises West (Free). "Everybody got to grow up. That's all right. I love folks when they grow up, I love 'em in the process of growing up, I love 'em before they grow up." Here, West's distinction between condemnation and "loving critique" is important because it emphasizes the importance of critique as a way of drawing attention to existing tensions for the purpose of creating or maintaining community.

Both Julie's and West's theorizations of a loving and necessary form of critique are related to what I call tender struggle in that they both envision critical work as being motivated by and for a greater relationality rather than creating distance. To practice such a model of critical pedagogy or engagement, one must of necessity cede any sense of righteousness; as Julie explains, one must remain open to the possibility that there may be other aggressions unaccounted for in present critical discourses. One must be willing to admit, as West does, that "Everyone needs to grow; I need to grow." This openness is necessary for tenderness; it is both what motivates a tender struggle

as well as what distinguishes it from other modes of critical engagement.

IV.

The openness that characterizes a tender mode of critical engagement elicits an ethical response from the reader, while at the same time demonstrating the receptivity between the writer and the narrative. Héctor Tobar's recent novel *The Barbarian Nurseries* (2011) provides an account of Los Angeles's spatial extension and development that is particularly attuned to the ways in which the politics of race, class and immigration have been central organizing feature of that process. It is not an example of a tender narrative or a tender struggle. Part of what determines this is the emphasis on a large, structural narrative vision. The actions and the characters of the novel are the result of large, structural forces or events. Characters or events are included in the narrative as a way to comment on broader forces that are at work in the world. I don't mean to suggest that it is a completely structural-determinist narrative but, rather, that it has a tendency to focus its attention on individual characters only insofar as they direct one's focus back upon "larger" scales of power (i.e. the national, the global). Take, for example, the following description of one of the characters in *The Barbarian Nurseries*, Deputy Suarez:

> He had managed to complete four years of high school and

> two years at Rio Hondo College without studying a single work of modern art, and he was also in the minority of people of Latino descent in Southern California who had never heard of Frida Kahlo. *This is what they call "pathology." I remember that from my criminology class.* (240)

Here, the characterization of the deputy is meant to leave the reader with a sense of having a "complete" knowledge of this person within the structure of "larger" forces: namely, the failure of a U.S. education system pressured towards a greater emphasis on rote professionalization rather than critical thinking. There is not much more to Deputy Suarez's character beyond that. We do not really learn about who this man is in this description. It is not a characterization. It is meant to be a critique of the American education system. And yet, the person that is described in those brief lines, is someone very familiar to me, someone that I'm sure I've encountered at some point in my life. Absent his exposure, culturally or academically, to matters of art he becomes the first in a long chain of people responsible for Araceli's hunt by the police, the news media and the public. With this description he is less a deputy than he is an example of the failures that result from the public education system's professionalization or the general lack of funding and appreciation for the arts. Tobar does

not care about this person and neither does he want the readers to care for him. Tobar brings in this man whom I'm sure I've recognized *in real life*, only because he wants us to care about the professionalization of public education, or about the lack of respect for Latin American art history. Of course we regret and lament this state of affairs but the narrative refuses to go deeper or extend itself outward so that we can ask other questions about why this is lamentable in the first place. As with the protagonist Araceli, Tobar's intention here is very clear: these characters' stories are only explored insofar as they allow us to think about something else *beyond* their lives. They are utilitarian figures in that sense. This is the opposite of what I want to argue is the case in tender narratives, which tend to include a greater kind of attention to characters as people.

In my exploration of tender modes of narrative relation, I have been compelled to ask: what is the purpose of fiction? What happens when we approach it, as writers or readers, in one particular mode of relation versus another? Is literature to serve as an example of something else beyond itself? Do authors write characters in order to answer for themselves other, broader questions? Or do they write them simply for the purpose of exploring them? Do we read Latina/o literature in order to answer questions about the political economy, about gender politics, about race? How do we listen to the arguments

that stories are articulating for themselves?

Compare the characterization of Deputy Suarez with what goes on in *What You See in the Dark* (2011) with one of the many characters that we follow with care and tenderness. “She wasn’t just Mrs. Watson. Her name was Arlene, and she had once had a husband who said her name in the dark, and years ago her brother had come back from prison to hug her and tell her that she was a sweet little sister” (53). And later, again:

> She was a waitress. She was a motel owner. She was a mother. She was an abandoned wife. She served coffee. She had a brother whom she had loved from a great distance, yet never saw again. Her name was Arlene. She served pie. Her name was Mrs. Watson. Her name was Arlene Watson before and during and after. She slid coins off countertops and dropped them into her apron pockets. She wanted to tell this to those girl waitresses to see if they would understand—that she was all of those things, and the town had a story about her and yet the story would never, ever come close to the truth. That she had a story and that it could change and that it was not over and that she was not on the last page. How one day she was happily married, and the next she was forty-seven

> years old, a thumb on the money in the right pocket of her uniform. *Things change,* she wanted to say. *You don't know anybody's story*. (55)

Muñoz, I argue, reveals a struggle of his own as a writer. In these moments Arlene Watson, the waitress, the wife, the sister, the mother, the character in Muñoz's novel is not only resisting the stories that people in the novel's Bakersfield tell about her, but also the story that Muñoz's novel itself is telling about her. Arlene resists being enclosed, being captured, being reduced in any way, especially in the way that Tobar does with Deputy Suarez in *Barbarian Nurseries*. I want to push for thinking that Arlene is not only saying these things to the other waitresses in the diner, or even to Manuel Muñoz, but also to us as readers. Arlene Watson, the character in Manuel Muñoz's *What You See*, is speaking to us the readers and prohibiting us the impulse to forget about her once we finish reading and close the final pages of the novel or to reduce her to the sum of these different descriptions of her.

Here, then, I am suggesting a reading of the novel along the lines of how John Beverley theorizes the ethics of reading testimonio narratives, especially in its urgent demand for the reader's personal engagement. This urgency and relationality of the testimonio narrative is what Beverley claims as the form's radical break from the generic

conventions of the bourgeois novel. For Beverley, "the [bourgeois] novel is a closed and private form in the sense that both the story and the subject end with the end of the text, defining that autoreferential self-sufficiency that is the basis of formalist reading practices" (42). In other words, whatever happens in the novel remains there without necessarily affecting the world outside of it, the in which the reader participates. Thus, whatever happens in the novel is marginally important to the reader. However, since the narrator of a testimonio is a real person, ignoring or marginalizing the relevance of such a narrative carries a different ethical weight than if it were "purely fictional." And, yet, in the case of *What You See in the Dark*, there is a similar challenge to the autoreferentiality of the novel (as a bourgeois narrative form).

Perhaps John Beverley's theorization of the testimonio will help to establish some guidelines for distinguishing between the writing of folks like Tobar from that of the authors studied in this dissertation. "In oral history," Beverley explains, "it is the intentionality of the recorder—usually a social scientist—that is dominant, and the resulting text is in some sense 'data'" (32). In this sense, then, the agency of the speaker being recorded is always subordinated to that of the recorder or the editor who cuts and frames her speech. Beverley goes on:

> In testimonio, by contrast, it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself. (32)

To be sure, not all of the narratives that I examine in this dissertation are written in the first-person narrative voice, one of the most critical elements of Beverley's theoretical account of testimonio's extra-literary quality. What I am suggesting, therefore, is to listen to the urgency of these narratives demonstrated in the tenderness with which they narrate the lives of their characters and their worlds. Unlike testimonio narratives which might enact their engagement of the reader by making reference to people, places or events that are publicly or historically recognizable, the ethical engagement that tender narratives demand is made through emotional, affective relation. Though they are not necessarily monumental events or figures, there is an urgency to listen to them and care for them that these stories communicate.

Another thing that Beverley says about testimonio that applies to the way I've been thinking about tender narratives—though specifically in comparing Viramontes's writing with that of Héctor

Tobar's—is the position of the authorial voice.

> Testimonio involves a sort of erasure of the function, and thus also of the textual presence, of the "author," which by contrast is so central in all major forms of bourgeois writing since the Renaissance, so much so that our very notions of literature and the literary are bound up with notions of the author, or, at least, of an authorial intention…The erasure of authorial presence in the testimonio, together with its nonfictional character, makes possible a different kind of complicity—might we call it fraternal/sororal?—between narrator and reader than is possible in the novel, which, as Lukacs has demonstrated, obligates an ironic distancing on the part of both novelist and reader from the fate of the protagonist. (35)

The testimonio, in other words, obligates the reader to consider her/his relation with the testimonio's narrator as a consequence of the absence of an authorial literary-artistic voice.

One example of how we see this with respect to Viramontes's work is when, in conversation, she undercuts her own authorial/authoritative role in the production of the stories. A case in point would be her explanation of the elements in her short story "The Moths" such as the description of a chayote vine that appears to

"cradle" a house or the emergence of small gray moths from a deceased woman's soul. According to Viramontes, these are things that she didn't *intend* to happen but that "actually happened" (personal conversation). Thus, Viramontes implies that the stories themselves have their own kind of autonomous existence, an existence that is separate from but not un-related to her own. The relation between Viramontes and the story is the publication of the story, its transcription into written form; but neither does the written form nor the relation with Viramontes determine the final limits of the story's existence. Viramontes suggests, and I agree, that the story exists beyond the words on the pages of the book. Following Beverley's point, this is what makes her writing anti-bourgeois and testimonio-like, demanding something more than a formalist reading. Her tender mode of writing promotes the elaboration of relations between the text and social, historical contexts.

The other way in which we can see the erasure of Viramontes's authorial presence or function in "The Moths" is in the fact that it is narrated from the perspective of the unnamed protagonist of the story. In other words, "The Moths" is a testimonio precisely because it is the story's "protagonist" that narrates it. It is her story to tell (even if she's not alone in it). And if, as Beverley claims, this testimonio implies a representational value perhaps it is because it takes for itself the

privilege of being (relatively) unmarked and refusing to (dis)qualify itself in its telling. By this I mean that the fact that the narrator never formally identifies herself, her family or her location lends the narrative a certain kind of authentic representational quality. [8] Obviously, there is no attempt to make a formal identification; yet, nonetheless, the reader does approach a *real* familiarization. That is, the narrator of "The Moths" presents her story in the same way that a narrative of white, middle class and/or heterosexual characters is often presented unmarked, without naming these particularities—that is, without prior qualification, without asking for permission. For the truth is that, too often, identifying a story as Chicana, working class or ghetto is already a dis-qualification of that narrative.[9] The refusal to mark itself relates to the "stamp of reality" that the narrative bears and its authentic representational value. We can relate to this character and their story. In fact, there is a demand for the reader to do so. None of this, however, suggests that such a relation will be easy or positive, hence my discussion in Chapter Three about the risks involved when Helena Viramontes tries to keep it real in "The Moths."

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[8] Here I mean a "formal" identification, like a name, which I relate to other state-mediated identifications like social security number, visa number, passport ID number, citizenship status, etc.

[9] Just as every time I drive through the Border Patrol's interior checkpoint near Sarita, Texas, or when I de/board a bus at the Rochester, NY bus station, and I agree to disclose my citizenship status to the agent, I (dis)qualify my own presence as a brown man.

I move from thinking about the implications of tenderness for ways of knowing and understanding, to talking about the ways in which this mode challenges particular definitions of work by turning to H.G. Carrillo's novel *Loosing My Espanish* (2004) in Chapter Four. My reading of Carrillo's novel focuses on the novel's attempts to instruct the reader in the exercise of creative imagination as a method of critical consciousness within a context in which what is most lacking is precisely a stable perspective from which to move forward and through space-time. Part of the difficulty of establishing a firm perspective comes from the fact that the narrative's prose takes the form of a long first-person address of the reader, in the second person, as one of the students attending the narrator's final lecture. Delossantos's style of historical lecturing involves a creative rearrangement of otherwise discontinuous themes, events and bodies as a way of countering colonialism's own alchemical reorganizations of people, places and narratives. In this way, the novel reveals the significant labor involved in creating, repeating and transforming the stories that structure everyday experience. This then provides a unique opening into discussing the importance of feelings and emotions in the understanding of what constitutes activist work through a brief detour into black feminist thought on writing, race and gender.

The focus of Chapter Five turns to the fiction of Manuel Muñoz as a site for exploring the ethics and politics of occupying liminal sites and cultivating vulnerability. Much of Muñoz's fiction focuses on the difficulty of acknowledging one's own susceptibility to being affected by others, even when this openness is also sought as a means for connection. Borrowing from the work of Erinn Gilson and Judith Butler on cultivating vulnerability as an ethical resource and María Lugones's concept of "complex communication" in organizing deep cross-cultural coalitions, I argue that the tender struggles modeled in Muñoz's stories are part of a similar attempt to theorize an anti-oppressive mode of politics. This mode of politics emphasizes relationality to a degree that diffuses responsibility laterally rather than accumulating vertically.

These chapters move between many different scholarly fields and areas. The idea behind this movement is that it maintains the central idea of "Tender Struggles": remaining open to the impingements and impressions of various disciplines. This movement is a difficult task to undertake with little guarantee of a sure outcome (either positive or negative). As with the fiction studied here, this is an attempt to communicate tenderness through a particular form.

CHAPTER TWO

LOST IN THE BOTÁNICA

I.

In his essay "Hispanic" from the collection *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002), Richard Rodriguez begins his contemplation of Hispanic/Latino identity by listing a series of definitions of the term that range from a strict encyclopedic meaning—"*Hi.spa´.nick.* 1. Spanish, *adjective*" (103)—to its more colloquial uses—"A synonym for the future (salsa having replaced catsup on most American kitchen tables.)…Highest high school dropout rate" (103). Despite the significant degree of conversation around the cultural, political, demographic and economic importance of Hispanics that dominated the turn of the 21st century, "The question remains," Rodriguez claims, "Do Hispanics exist?" (104). It is a question that haunts Latina/o studies as an interdisciplinary academic field,[10] and that is also significant to the people (especially cultural producers like Rodriguez) it purports to represent. "'Hispanic' and 'Latino,'" political theorist Cristina Beltrán explains, "tell us nothing about country of

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[10] A brief summary of texts that have taken up this question might include a list of works ranging from sociology, history, and anthropology to cultural theory/studies, political theory and literary studies. Some useful examples include: Cristina Beltrán's *The Trouble with Unity* (2010); G. Cristina Mora's *Making Hispanics* (2014); Raúl Coronado's *A World Not to Come* (2013); Arlene Dávila's *Latinos, Inc.*

origin, gender, citizenship status, economic class, or length of residence in the United States" (6). "Moreover," she continues:

> both categories are racially indeterminate: Latinos can be white, black, indigenous, and every combination thereof. In other words, characterizing a subject as either 'Hispanic' or 'Latino' is an exercise in opacity—the terms are so comprehensive that their explanatory power is limited. When referring to 'Latinos in the United States,' it is far from immediately clear whether the subjects under discussion are farmworkers living below the poverty line or middle-class homeowners, urban hipsters or rural evangelicals, white or black, gay or straight, Catholic or Jewish, undocumented Spanish monolinguals or fourth-generation speakers of English-only. (6)

This comprehensiveness or lack of explanatory power is not coincidental, nor inconsequential; such labels have had significant ramifications for public policy (most obviously) as well as everyday understandings about race and racism.[11] While most people would

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(2001); Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *On Latinidad* (2007); Suzanne Oboler's *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives* (1995).

[11] Here, I'm thinking in particular about the public discussions that emerged once it was revealed that George Zimmerman—a self-proclaimed neighborhood security officer who killed an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin, claiming he was behaving suspiciously and made him fear for his safety—was the son of a Peruvian mother and

agree that "Hispanic" and "Latino" are categories that are mediated through socio-cultural, political and historical contexts, there does tend to be a difference in determining whether these categories of identity find their "origins" in media, bureaucracy or the communities represented by these terms themselves.[12] Are these categories self-determined or externally imposed? Who decides their meaning and use; why and when? The following chapter offers an attempt to observe the ways in which this question of Latina/o identity is creatively configured in the works of three Latina/o writers through reference to the figure of the botánica as a special site for the negotiation of Latina/o identity. Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), Ernesto

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white, Jewish father. Some claimed that Zimmerman couldn't be accused of racism in his actions because he was Latino. (The logic here being that racism only occurs in the relation between a member of a dominant racial group and that of another.) Others, however, were more nuanced in their reading of the murder of Trayvon Martin, pointing out that racism operates in many different forms of relation, including between different minoritized groups and even between one's self.

[12] Especially useful for these questions, I think, are G. Cristina Mora's and Arlene Dávila's works. Another important area of work that provides some answers to how Latinidad (as ethnicity) is defined is that of scholars who trace the ways in which race and the policing of immigration laws have operated to equate Latinidad with "migrant illegality," thus making all Latinos susceptible to the extra-official scrutiny of such policing agencies. See, for instance: De Genova, Nicholas. "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 31 (2002): 419-47; Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects*. Princeton: Prinston UP, 2003; Gonzales, Alfonso. "The 2006 Mega Marchas in Greater Los Angeles: Counter-hegemonic Moment and the Future of El Migrante Struggle." *Latino Studies*. 7.1

Quiñonez's *Chango's Fire* (2004) and Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints* (2007) provide three examples of the exploration of Latina/o identity's mediated reality in contemporary Latina/o fiction. I will focus on the ways in which this takes place in all three novels, in particular, through their representations of the botánica.

Botánicas are ambiguous spaces. They are, at once, spaces of commercial exchange, but also spaces of spiritual communion. Patrons visit such spaces to commune with others, to seek spiritual guidance or remedies for all kinds of problems including relationships, as well as mental and physical ailments. However, much of this healing, guidance and communion is provided as part of an exchange or transaction. For example, a remedy for a problem at work might involve certain prayers or spiritual acts that require the purchase of items sold in the botánica such as prayer candles, special oils or other offerings. Thus, the botánica cannot be neatly categorized as strictly spiritual, commercial or communal. Nevertheless, in these three novels, I argue that the botánica is a central site for a collective Latina/o identity precisely because of this ambiguity. They provide us with an interesting example of the ways in which Latina/o identity may be mediated by consumption and the marketplace without becoming subsumed by the logic of capital. Part of the reason for this,

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(2009): 30-59; Schmidt-Camacho, Alicia. *Migrant Imaginaries*. New

I hope to show, has to do with the relative marginality of the folk spiritual and healing practices that botánicas are associated with, as well as by the marginality of the botánica as a space.

II.

The botánica figures as a site whose marginality conceals its centrality in issues of identity negotiation. In other words, as much work in borderlands and postcolonial thought has taught us, the margins often have much more to offer for theorizing the center than one might assume at first. As a site that is defined by two realms that are often seen as contradictory with respect to any articulation of identity— economic (mediated) and religious/spiritual (essential) —it is the purpose of this paper to consider (literary representations of) the botánica as a privileged site in which there is no reconciliation of the mediated or the essential elements of Latinidad; not necessarily because it *cannot* offer a sufficient solution to this dilemma, but rather because it does not conceive of these spheres as being mutually exclusive or antagonistic. The literary representations of the botánica explored here offer critical insights into the ways in which these spaces traffic simultaneously in both the commercial and the religious realms without any self-consciousness of what is considered from a strictly economic or religious perspective as conflictive. The botánica is

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York: NYU Press, 2008;

hybrid.

In considering the representation of specifically Afro-Cuban botánicas and their relation to Santería/Regla de Ochá, it is imperative to note that these syncretic religious practices, borrowing from various different African spiritual-religious traditions and European Catholicism, are themselves significantly the result of a forced transculturation.[13] As the narrator Julio summarizes in Ernesto Quiñónez's *Chango's Fire*:

> It's a religion of poet priests yanked out of their beloved Africa and forced to embrace not just slavery in the new world but also Catholicism…Santeria became one with so many other things in order to survive. It adapted and transformed itself into something new. It is this instinct of survival that lives to this day in botanicas all over the country. (77)

Julio's understanding of this syncretic religious form is helpful for the

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[13] "Transculturation" is a term coined by the influential Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in an attempt to lend more weight to the mutual influences of (mostly) African and European traditions in the creation of a "transcultural" Cuban national identity in the early twentieth century. Premised on the observation of Cuba as an island of displaced peoples from around the world, it is one of the earliest attempts by Latin American intellectuals to take into account the diversity of the continent in their theorizations of modernity; even if it overestimates the concept of displacement as something experienced equally among all Cubans, culminating in the supposedly happy *ajiaco* (stew) of Cuban multiculturalism.

attention that it pays to the material circumstances of its inception: colonialism and the African slave trade. In other words, the "hybridity" of the botánica is complex. If there is any agency evidenced in this kind of hybridity, it is surely one that is exercised under conditions of extreme duress. The African slaves' "embrace" of Catholicism that Julio refers to is strategic: Santería is the result of an unequal negotiation (Antonio Gramsci's "hegemony"), between the African slaves' desire to live in observance of their spiritual practices and the colonizer's demands for total obedience. This association that Julio attempts to draw between Santería's historical roots and its contemporary practices also forms a partial focus of the present chapter.

Given Santería's historical development as a specifically Afro-Cuban religious practice, it is interesting to note the particular weight that the botánicas bring to bear for panethnic identity in *Still Water Saints*, *Chango's Fire* and *Dreaming in Cuban*. Whereas García's novel explicitly treats the story of one transnational family, reaching from Cuba to New York; Espinoza's and Quiñonez's novels both regard a more heterogeneous community. In the case of *Chango's Fire*, Spanish Harlem's long-standing identification as a specifically Nuyorican neighborhood is compromised not only by the arrival of the young, affluent white gentry but also by the influx of other Latin American

immigrants seeking refuge and employment in the then-booming real estate construction bubble of the early 2000s. As for *Still Water Saints*' Agua Mansa, a fictional Southern California city not far from the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the narration of the predominantly Mexican American community also includes a few important non-Mexican actors. Most significantly present in the narrative are those who were displaced by the state-sponsored violence in Central America during the 1980s; a situation in which the United States government played no small role.[14] How, then, does something like Santería, a religious-spiritual practice that has already been "contaminated" (as it were) by its various routes/roots, function as a sufficient site for a pan-ethnic Latino identity (that already has its own issues of diversity)? How does this prior exposure to other cultural, religious and spiritual elements allow the botánica to function as a site of collective identity?

III.

Each of these novels demonstrates a particular awareness of the degrees to which life is increasingly involved in and defined by the circulation and accumulation of capital. What they reveal, however, are the ways in which this integration or embeddedness of capitalism with/in everyday life is experienced in complex rather than

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[14] See, especially, Greg Grandin's *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (2007) and Juan

straightforward ways. This is not to suggest that the narratives erase the significant shaping force of capital and the market. What they do suggest, instead, is that even within a context where, as Marxist geographer David Harvey points out, "Almost everything we now eat and drink, wear and use, listen to and hear, watch and learn comes to us in commodity form," (82) this does not preclude the opportunity for exercising a critical sense of the world. In fact, Harvey argues, a critique of the logic of capital can only function when one takes into account the ways in which all modes of sociality (like capitalism) are materially engaged with/in everyday life. These modes of relation either flourish or fail depending on their ability to appropriate, use, bend and re-shape various material processes to their own purposes (78). Therefore, the awareness that these novels bring to the complexity of capital's embeddedness in everyday forms of life points towards a critical alternative to inhabiting and moving through this highly market-mediated world of relations.

Dreaming in Cuban, for example, includes an important scene in which the novel's protagonist Pilar expresses her distress about the commodification of provocative art and the New York City punk scene of the late 1970s and early 80s, forcing her to feel nostalgic for a moment in her life that she has only recently experienced.

González's *The Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*

Commiserating with Franco, a record shop cashier and fellow true Lou Reed fan, she remarks: "St. Mark's Place is a zoo these days with the bridge-and-tunnel crowd wearing fuchsia mohawks and safety pins through their cheeks. Everybody wants to be part of the freak show for a day. Anything halfway interesting gets co-opted, mainstreamed. We'll all be doing car commercials soon" (198). In other words, Pilar fears the transformation of punk culture and music from a mode of being into an experience to be bought, sold and traded, and which marketers can capitalize upon for selling other commodities. Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez comment on this scene as indicative of a particular dilemma that the novel attempts to address: how does/can one make authentic connections to others and/or to one's identity within a period of increased commodification? Dalleo and Machado Sáez argue that García's novel exemplifies a nuanced reading of Latina/o subjectivity's saturation by market principles along the lines of Néstor García Canclini's and Arlene Dávila's interpretations of citizenship and ethnic identity within an increasingly market-oriented sphere (112). According to Dalleo and Machado Sáez's reading of *Dreaming in Cuban*, the logic of the novel's narrative ambivalently suggests that "it is no longer possible to imagine a world outside the marketplace, nor for that matter a resistant Latino/a subject who is

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(2000).

not part of the marketplace" (130; my emphasis). This is not necessarily to claim (pace Gil Scott Heron) that the revolution will, in fact, be televised (or commodified in some form) but rather, they point out, that the novel seems to be aware that capital has transformed modes of relation to a degree that is too significant to disregard or discount, even or especially as a means for mobilizing alternatives. As Harvey might put it, capital has bent and reshaped life in such a way that, while perhaps not irreversible, certainly necessitates a frank account of its material effects. "While art is eventually co-opted by the mass market in the United States," Dalleo and Machado Sáez contend that the novel suggests that "there nevertheless remains the potential of reaching a global community or creating a community through art" (129). Although Pilar's encounter with Franco is mediated by the commodification and marketing of music (via the record shop), they form a bond in which they critique capital's encroachment on and appropriation of cultural forms and maintain an appreciation for punk culture as more than a tradable good. In other words, the two characters literally meet in the marketplace but are not compelled to define their subjectivity as a vacuum to be filled through the consumption of market-delivered object.

Julio, the protagonist of *Chango's Fire*, provides a description of Spanish Harlem that documents the nascent gentrification of this

neighborhood through so called revitalization campaigns and empowerment zoning: “Spanish Harlem was worthless property in the seventies and early eighties,” he explains (6). But “Today, the wait is over, Spanish Harlem’s burned out buildings are gold mines…Empowerment zoning has changed the face of the neighborhood. Chain stores rise like monsters from a lake. Gap. Starbucks. Blockbuster Video. Old Navy. Like the new Berlin, El Barrio is being rebuilt from its ashes” (7). Julio’s comparison of El Barrio to post-unification Berlin references capital’s significant force in shaping and forming cities. The sudden influx of capital to El Barrio, following decades of disinvestment and neglect by both the state and capital, is compared to the similarly stark shift in the planning and development of Berlin after the fall of the Soviet Union. Each of these newer, global franchise businesses provides a veneer of a neighborhood’s renewed vitality that masks the pending destruction of different ways of life in El Barrio: people getting their morning coffees from the corner deli (instead of Starbucks) and shopping at locally-owned Latino stores, rather than patronizing chain retail shops. What Julio describes is the process of gentrification through so-called “revitalization,” a process that has particularly plagued poor and working class communities of color, such as the Lower East Side, Harlem and parts of Brooklyn in New York City, as well as neighborhoods in East and South Central

Los Angeles, to name only a few examples from the two largest cities in the U.S.[15] Neighborhoods that had previously experienced decades of disinvestment are suddenly flooded with cash from elsewhere and, in the process, native residents are pushed out by rents being increased to unaffordable amounts. While this subsequent displacement of the local population may seem like an unintended consequence—and it is often explained in this way—it is, in fact, the objective of such revitalization efforts.

Where others might see El Barrio as a series of streets and blocks of buildings, Julio's narration of his neighborhood is more attuned to the social nature of space:

> After work, I walk to the check-cashing place…and, like most other days, when I reach my street, I stop and stare at my building, at the third floor, carefully. See that floor, I own it, I tell myself…I see Mami's silhouette pass by the

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[15] It is curious to me when some scholars of urban economics ignore the racial dimensions of spatial production and transformation when it is, in fact, one of the most important animating tropes for processes of displacement and dispossession that are central to accounts of capitalist accumulation. The opening pages to Neil Smith's *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996), for instance, provides one of the most compelling accounts for why this is so without actually saying it. In his attempt to contextualize and introduce the rising global tide of gentrification Smith is compelled to remark on the ways in which this revanchism is undergirded not only by a repertoire of (American) frontier images and trope—i.e., the discourse of the conquest of racialized subjects and their land—but also by a rehearsing of familiar strategies and tactics.

> window in my parents' bedroom, and I smile, thinking they must have been fighting and she moved herself to the living room. On the first floor, I see a brother from Maritza's crazy church fighting with the entrance gate that is stuck…and though Maritza keeps inviting me, I never go. I also see Helen walking into the building, coming back from work? I think. (32)

When Julio stares at his building, he doesn't tell us much about the architectural or aesthetic features of the building. Instead, he describes the social architecture and life of the building, mapping out the different relations that happen in and around it. And it is perhaps no coincidence that Helen, the newly-arrived white, middle class art studio owner, is the one person in this survey of the social landscape that escapes integration into the narration. To Julio, her arrival represents as much of a threat of invasion as Starbucks or any of the other chain stores. Though Julio may be suspicious of her intentions in the neighborhood, they are still ultimately unclear. It is important to him that she is accounted for because it is the relations between people that matter most in Julio's geography of El Barrio. "'If you are going to make this neighborhood your home, you claim it,' " he tells Helen (51). " 'You don't just pay your rent or put money in, the people in this neighborhood could care less, they will bug you until they see

some guts in you…You also claim it by not going to Starbucks or Old Navy but the Latino stores too'" (51). With these comments, Julio registers the importance of belonging as a practice and relation. More importantly, the act of patronizing local businesses as a mode of claiming belonging echoes similar analyses of the ways in which citizenship and subjectivity are increasingly mediated through consumption practices in neoliberalism (García-Canclini; Dávila; Dalleo and Machado Sáez). Here, however, Julio isn't suggesting that Helen will magically become a part of the community once she starts spending money in the Latino shops, rather than the chain stores. Belonging in Spanish Harlem goes beyond consumption practices. But, given the extent that capital and market-oriented thinking has permeated objects in everyday life, one's performance of community belonging is also significantly staged within the marketplace.

The botánica's centrality in the practice of identity negotiation is then not only predicated on the syncretic history of Santería, but more significantly on its ability to negotiate its uniqueness in an increasingly globalized market context. Julio's safe haven from the encroaching forces of global capital is not another site that is altogether outside of the market, but rather one that deals with its incorporation in a unique manner. In his advice to Helen, he does not dismiss consumption altogether, but advocates for a more

conscientious form of consumption: shopping at the Latino stores *as well* as corporate chain stores. The issue here is not so much that the market is suddenly invading Spanish Harlem, but more so that a *particular* market force is being exerted on the community, whose geography was already partially defined by certain commercial spaces like Papelito's botánica and other Latino stores.

In Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints*, the reader is also made aware of the shifts in the economic geography of Agua Mansa and some of the effects these have on the relations between people. The geography of Agua Mansa is much different from that of Spanish Harlem. Instead of brownstones and tight city blocks, Agua Mansa is characterized by strip mall shopping centers, freeways and a relative sense of rurality that is quickly giving way to greater transformation of this Inland Empire area from a primarily agricultural region into one defined by service industries. The reader is made aware of this throughout the narrative by way of mostly brief details: the smaller family-run shops in one strip mall are being forced to close and move by larger stores with greater capital; Pilar, the protagonist and proprietor of the Botánica Oshún, must travel longer distances to see her doctor in a newer office building; new housing units are being developed in previously agricultural zones, etc. Perhaps the most comprehensive description of this transformation, however, comes

toward the end of the novel in which Lluvia, a young muralist hired by Perla to paint a mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the side of the Botánica Oshún, provides an interesting ekphrasis of her completed work that is worth citing at length:

> In the far background are the sharp and jagged peaks of the San Bernardino Mountains, with white veins trickling down their sides for snow. Stretching from the mountains are fields of citrus trees. The groves fade into new housing tracts, the trees themselves transforming into the skeletons of houses. The dirt rows where migrant farmworkers pick lemons and oranges melt into concrete streets of Agua Mansa. The city spreads out before you, a grid of gray avenues and boulevards lined with shops and buildings—Tina's Taco Heaven, the Agua Mansa Palms, San Salvador's church, our house. The streets are shaded with eucalyptus trees and pines and oaks, electrical wires tangled among their branches. There are cell phone towers disguised as palm trees, their steel trunks tagged with graffiti. A paletero pushes his ice cream cart down Redondo. Ranflas cruise up Descanso. On Meridian, a school bus releases a group of kids carrying Dora the Explorer and Spider-Man back-packs. The 10 runs from

> left to right with cars and motorcycles and trucks. The north-south streets run down, flowing like tributaries into the Santa Ana in the foreground, widening and expanding it. The río skirts the border of the city, passing through channels and the tall green stalks of wild horsetail and arundo canes. In the bottom right corner, just as the wall is about to end, the water changes. It becomes a strip of turquoise fabric tumbling from the lap of Santa Ana herself, who sits on a bench stitching gold stars onto it by hand. (229-30)

The narrative that Lluvia provides highlights the dynamicity of the mural. The painting she describes is not static; it is in-process and alive. In this way, it is reminiscent of the dynamic description that Julio provides of his building in *Chango's Fire*, where relationality is emphasized. Lluvia's mural, per her narration, suggests a historical progression that moves from an older, bucolic scene to a more contemporary and urbanized one that, interestingly, does not necessarily destroy the older scene as much as it preserves it in a superficial, hybrid incorporation including "electrical wires tangled among [tree] branches" and "cell phone towers disguised as palm

trees."[16] This incorporation is part of a trope of blending that Lluvia emphasizes in her mural painting, from trees that transform into the skeletons of houses, to streets flowing like tributaries of a river, to the river itself becoming a piece of fabric manipulated by a saint. Change and transformation are constant phenomena in this mural.

The landscapes described by *Chango's Fire* and *Still Water Saints* register an awareness of geography's active and narrative quality: that is, space not as a background to the stories, but rather space as produced through/as narrative, where different spatial articulations are structured by various "grammars" (Brady 7). But, even where these spaces seem to be produced through a dominant geographic logic or "grammar," there is also an active negotiation of these processes: either by staking a (counter-)claim to space through consumption practices; by tagging the steel trunks of cell phone towers disguised as palm trees; by painting a mural on the side of a building that reveals the narrativity of a city; or even by narrating space or the urban environment itself as a series of social relations, rather than providing a flat, two-dimensional description of it as a series of surfaces.

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[16] Indeed, the narration of these particular elements of the mural recalls Dean MacCannell's comment on the victory of the modern over the nonmodern in a moment of surfaces and reflections: "the best indication of the final victory of modernity over other sociocultural arrangements is not the disappearance of the nonmodern world, but its artificial preservation and reconstruction in modern society" (8).

IV.

As another element of the urban landscape, the figure of the botánica in the three novels functions both as a site where things happen, as well as a sight that is visually experienced. These two different characteristics of the experience of the botánica in these novels point toward a relationship similar to the one seen above in the experience of the urban landscape; where there is some nuance in the experience of the botánica as an alienating sight/site of Latina/o identity for the characters of the novels. In a sense, it figures as the limit at which Latina/o identity ends and begins.

The section titled "Daughters of Changó" in *Dreaming in Cuban* describes Pilar's first time inside a botánica and also suggests much about marketplaces functioning as sites/sights of intercultural interpellation. Pilar's first stop in this narrative is at a record shop, where she remarks on the inability of the shopping experience to inspire her to do anything constructive. Commenting on some of the older records she sees in the record shop's remainder bins, Pilar suggests: "There's something grotesque about their grins, fixed for thirty years. Maybe I'd do them a favor by buying their records and breaking them in two" (197). Later finding a Herb Alpert record, "the one with the woman in whipped cream on the cover," Pilar comments how "It looks so tame to me now" (197). In their reading of *Dreaming in*

Cuban, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez rightly underline the importance of this present disappointment that Pilar expresses over these commercial images and their inability to help Pilar re-establish a (lost) authentic connection to Cuba (120).

However, it might be necessary to press further on this inquiry by taking note of how Pilar's change in political attitude is registered temporally. Saying that the record looks "tame" from a present perspective (i.e., now) suggests that at some previous point in time ("back then") the experience of consuming the record (commodity) might have actually provided some positive impression. As in the lyric of the 1979 song "Lost in the Supermarket" by The Clash, Pilar "can no longer shop happily."[17] The implication is that the poetic eye/I of The Clash's song, like Pilar, was at some point able to "shop happily" for *something*. While the song's lyrics very clearly present a strong critique of corporate capitalism's practice of commodification, it does not necessarily long for a return to a wholly un-commodified reality. Rather, the song suggests a fear of the global market extending its commodifying practices into more sacred areas: "I'm all lost in the supermarket / I can no longer shop happily / I came in here for that special offer / a guaranteed personality" ("Lost in the Supermarket"). It remains unclear what that unnamed *something* that Pilar and the

song's voice could once (but no longer) shop happily for was: a personality in the case of the song or some other sense of identity for Pilar?

As discussed above, the three novels suggest that there exists an important (if unequal) relationship between the market and the constitution of space and identity. Just as in *Chango's Fire*, where Julio recommends the practice of shopping at the "Latino stores," the commercial shopping experience figures in these novels as a sort of ritual that members of a community observe at least partly to ensure the re-generation of the space/identity. Considering this, then, it becomes difficult to think of any possible articulation of authentic identity existing completely *outside* of a market.

The search through the remainder bins is not in vain and results in Pilar's ability to relate with the attendant at the record store, interestingly first on a linguistic register and then later through a shared experience with popular music. "In the last bin, I find an old Beny Moré album. Two of the cuts are scratched but I buy it anyway for fifty cents…When I thank him [the cashier] in Spanish, he's surprised and wants to chat" (197). Pilar's use of Spanish thus provokes a second exchange that begins with a discussion of another iconic Cuban musical artist, Celia Cruz, and that eventually leads to a

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[17] I am grateful for Petrus Liu's insight on the temporality implied by

lamentation on the loss of authenticity in the New York punk scene.

The suggestion is that Franco understands Pilar's use of Spanish in some way; enough at least to provoke his desire to "chat" with Pilar about music. The narrative does not give enough clues to definitively establish if Franco understood Pilar's linguistic turn as another (exiled) Cuban in New York, like her; if he is some *other* Latino; or if he even understood the thanks from a linguistic insider perspective. The only suggestion that Franco might have understood Pilar's turn is that she decided to do so at all. It seems less important to determine whether or not he understands it as a linguistic "insider" or if he understands it as a marker of Pilar's own Latinoness. The most important part of the exchange is how it facilitates the initial interpellation between the two and how it then leads to a more profound level of recognition.

The recognition on the linguistic and Cuban registers is only preliminary to the subsequently more important interpellation of Franco and Pilar on the specific punk cultural level. "[W]e get to talking about Lou Reed. It's funny how the fans can sniff each other out…Franco, puts on the *Take No Prisoners* album. I was at the Bottom Line the night they recorded it. How many lifetimes ago was that? I think about all that great early punk and the raucous paintings

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this particular lyric of the song.

I used to do" (198). This rekindling of her earlier punk passions is what is most important to Pilar, even if the conversation was facilitated by the earlier recognition through her use of Spanish and their mutual familiarity with iconic Cuban music. She associates her appreciation of punk music very closely to her earlier artistic endeavors. This is then contrasted with Pilar's present situation in which she half-heartedly plays "this punky fake jazz everyone's into" (198) and in which she and Franco both "commiserate about how St. Mark's Place is a zoo these day" (198). Fearing that this once fervent group will "all be doing car commercials soon" (198), Pilar and Franco lament the loss of some authenticity or originality to their punk scene as it is co-opted into the mainstream as Dalleo and Machado note (123).

In any case, though, it is through the initial commercial exchange between consumer (Pilar) and seller (Franco) that makes this interpellation possible. Even as the two long for a more "authentic" or "original" Punk scene, this is still inseparable from any commercial circulation.[18] Pilar's reference to being at the recording of Lou Reed's

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[18] As Raul Fernandez points out in his discussion over the authenticity of Afro-Cuban music: "It is misinformed to regard 'commercialism' or 'the music industry' as unmitigated evils that affect the 'authenticity' of a genre. Much of what is regarded today as 'classic' Afro-Cuban music, the 'truly authentic,' developed in the ambiance of nightclubs and casinos patronized by U.S. tourists in Havana" (19). Although there is something to be said about the differences in club scenes between Afro-Cuban jazz and Punk music, this distinction about the cultural production of music is key.

Take No Prisoner's album claims an intimacy with the production of the commodity, but the fact would remain that she was never a member of the band in performance; her connection to the album's production remains that of patron. One can imagine Pilar listening to the album and thinking back on the night it was recorded, trying to distinguish her own voice out of the multitude that only registers on the recording as an opaque body of sound. This observation is not made in order to devalue the intimacy or authenticity of Pilar's experience with respect to the nascent New York Punk scene; rather, the attempt here is to maintain an awareness of the ways in which authenticity and intimacy are being defined. Franco and Pilar's lament that Punk culture is being co-opted into mainstream circulation in particular. As seen above in the discussion of Pilar's initial impressions as she browses through the remainder bins of the record shop and in the comparison with The Clash's "Lost in the Supermarket," this section of the novel suggests a particular definition of identity and/or the ability of different subjects to interpellate each other that are dependant on a pre-existing process of mediation demonstrated here in the form of commodity consumption. That particular kind of consumption that Pilar and Franco long for, however, is distinguished from some more mainstream, commodified form.

Following this very brief narration of loss— "I feel something's dried up inside me" (198) —it is significant, then, that Pilar's narrative moves immediately to a description of her visit to a botánica in Spanish Harlem. Upon entering the botánica, Pilar remarks: "I've passed the place before but I've never gone inside. Today, it seems, there's nowhere else for me to go" (199). It is perhaps this circumstance that colors her initial observations of the botánica, listing the different items that are placed on shelves for sale and witnessing the owner's interactions with another client from a detached and alienated perspective. "I envy this woman's passion, her determination to get what she knows is hers. I felt that way once" (199). Pilar's visit to the botánica, like the preceding episode in the record shop, calls attention to the way in which her sense of alienation is registered by an inability to see her (present) self as she observes the image of an*other* woman.[19] In both cases, the image of the other woman recalls memories of a past self that seems lost in the present of Pilar's narration. Pilar's encounter in the botánica specifically reminds her of her infancy in Cuba when she was first introduced to Santería by a nanny of hers (201). Having left Cuba at a young age and grown up in Brooklyn with a mother that strenuously denied any direct

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[19] Recall that in the record shop, her contemplation of a Herp Albert album —"the one with the woman in whipped cream on the cover"— provokes a sense of loss: "It looks so tame to me now," (197).

access to Pilar's Cuban origins —including her familiarity with Santería— Pilar's entrance into the "place" that she has for a long time only experienced externally suggests a very interesting return to a former self.

V.

If upon entering the botánica, however, Pilar crosses a previously established limit —"I've never gone inside"—, her return to an origin is suggestively defined by her contact with this marginal(ized) space. As noted above, this marginalization seems to function as one of and from the space of the botánica itself. That is, what initially appears as a marginal and alien space to Pilar, later seems to be only a result of Pilar's own alienation *from* something that was original to her. And this sense of alienation of/from the botánica also resonates with the representation of the botánica in both *Chango's Fire* and *Still Water Saints*, suggesting a loss of association or contact with something that was once close.

The representation of the botánica in *Chango's Fire* registers many of the observations that I attempt to argue in this paper. The marginalization of the botánica is encoded not only by the alternativeness that Santería represents in comparison to the more normative practice of Pentecostal/evangelical Christianity, but also by the politics of gender that the site transgresses against. Within the

narrative that Julio provides the reader of El Barrio, Papelito's transgressions are multiple. He not only practices an alternative (and feared) religion, but he is also openly gay. Something about this marginality, however, ensures the survival of the botánica and endows it with an undeniable centrality in the novel's narrative plot.

"Black as tar, with no trace of Spaniard in his lineage, at sixty-eight, Papelito is a man made up of rumors…[he] is the only gay man who can walk the streets of Spanish Harlem swaying his hips like a cable-suspended bridge and not be ridiculed" (Quiñonez, 33). According to Julio, Papelito also "has a certain flamboyant arrogance, a confidence, because he is protected by a religion that is as beautiful, as misunderstood and feared as he is" (33). These two characterizations of Papelito are interesting in that Julio's description already makes apparent something that is inherent about the botánica within the Latina/o community as marginal. Misunderstood and feared, Papelito and the botánica cannot inhabit the center of the community, although there is still a significant recognition of their importance that does not allow the hetero-masculine dominant community to ignore them completely.

Julio's narrative focus on Papelito's corporeal movement—"swaying his hips like a cable-suspended bridge"—registers Julio's insecurity about his own masculinity, especially as he seeks

assistance from Papelito for his economic and amorous endeavors. The botánica, Julio explains, "is always full of women" who are prone to "gossiping like witches" (70). "The place weeps femininity," (70) and in his quest to reverse the conquering threat of the Helen, Julio's association with the botánica jeopardizes his chances to assert this hetero-masculine role.

On the religious front, as Julio's mother warns, "'*Si entras allí* [Papelito's botánica]*, se te puede pegar algo*'" (46).[20] She believes that the "botanicas are houses of fallen angels…the ones that had left God's heaven and materialized their bodies to have sex with the daughters of man" (46). The negativity with which Julio's mother describes the botánica is specifically attached to the profane character of Santería, of the "fallen angels" that lost their mythic nature, joining the rank of man. It is precisely Julio's privileged affiliation with Papelito—his name is on the deed to Julio's apartment—that allows him to see beyond the many rumors that constitute Papelito's persona within the community and appreciate him as central figure in El Barrio instead of as a "misunderstood and feared" threat. And this privileged association is enabled precisely by Papelito's double-coding as a commercial-

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[20] "If you go in there, you can catch something" (46; my translation). The use of "pegar" (to catch) here carries a negative connotation because of its use to express phrases like, "to *catch* a cold," but in the Spanish there is a particular association with the "catching" of some

religious actor in the community. Even when Julio admits some apprehension about engaging Papelito as a santero, he takes comfort in Papelito's profane humanity. "Santeria is something else. Something real. But, above all, I have faith in Papelito" (74).

Perla, the owner-santer of Botánica Oshún in *Still Water Saints*, is also characterized by her marginality with respect to Agua Mansa. While this seems to be due primarily to Perla's ownership of the botánica, her alienation is also something that predicated her decision to inherit the botánica from its founder Darío. When she first approached the botánica, she had some apprehensions of her own, largely fueled by the gossip of her fellow parishioners of the San Salvador Catholic church (72). However, like Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*, the newly-opened botánica resonates with Perla's own memories of Mexican curandero (literally "healer") traditions as explained to her by her mother as well as with the Catholic saints. "*Why is everyone so afraid?* she thought. *San Antonio's in the window. There's crucifixes and pictures of Mary and Joseph by the door*" (73; italics in original).

Darío explains to Perla that he recognizes her skill for the practice of Santería by appealing to her sense of alienation. "'You have el don, the gift of healing'" Darío tells Perla after he observes her

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evil and it's attachment—"pegar" also means *to stick*—to the body of

making a homeopathic recommendation to a fellow customer. " 'But power like yours, like mine, like the woman I learned from, it doesn't come without a price'" he explains. Darío then enumerates the different types of losses that other curanderos endured while they were similarly endowed with the don (gift) of healing. " 'It [polio] shrunk my leg. It was my price. The woman I learned from, she was burned in a fire. Another man I knew, he was blind in one eye, but his gift of prophecy and his healing powers were strong'" (79). As for, Perla, the sterility of her husband Guillermo has left her childless and home alone while Guillermo leaves for work at a nearby factory.[21] This understanding of Santería provides a key insight for a reading of the novel's title *Still Water Saints* as a translation of the Agua Mansa (gentle water) residents as individuals that are brought together and spiritually endowed by their mutual experiences of loss. (I will return again to this recurring theme of loss below.) It is, therefore, Perla's alienation from a world beyond her limited domestic space that initially draws her to the (already marginalized) botánica and that ultimately defines her sense of belonging.

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the verb's subject.

[21] It is perhaps worthy of note, too, that besides the loss of any future possibility of children, the other significant absence that draws Perla to the botánica is the boredom she experiences as a housewife. Frustrated by her suffocating domestic existence and inability to have the family she hopes for, Perla explains to Guillermo that she wishes

Recapitulating these similar treatments of the botánica's marginality as its fundamentally resonating feature, it is necessary to restate *why* the botánica in particular should function in this way. Thinking again of these situations in comparison with that of the poetic voice in The Clash's "Lost in the Supermarket," it is perhaps not the botánica in and of itself that is alienating, but rather some change that has significantly created a sense of loss. In the case of Pilar, her exile from Cuba would seem to be the cause of that sense of loss. However, what makes this sense of loss and its association with the botánica particularly curious for the cases of *Still Water Saints* and *Chango's Fire* is that those communities are *not* predominantly Cuban and yet still experience a sense of re-connection with some lost familiarity. It is perhaps precisely because of Santería's hybrid routes/roots—it's adaptations and transformations—that the botánica functions in this way. "It is this instinct of survival" as Julio points out in *Chango's Fire*, "that lives to this day in botanicas all over the country" (77).

VI.

Loss, it seems, is one of the most important themes in all three novels. A nostalgic longing for identity is at the center of Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*; at the foreground of *Chango's Fire* is the

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to work for Darío at his botánica: " 'I'm not doing it for that [money],'

calculated destruction and gentrification of El Barrio; and the individual characters of *Still Water Saints* share their own personal losses of loved ones in first-person narratives. Death, too, seems to bring the novels' communities together. The death of a pedestrian brings together a large crowd from the community of Agua Mansa at the end of *Still Water Saints*. Similarly, the death of Papelito in his attempts to save the occupants of a building on fire in *Chango's Fire* draws a congregation of local residents. And the death of Pilar's grandmother Celia in *Dreaming in Cuban* is presumably what makes necessary the recounting of the stories that make up the novel.

These are only a few of the examples of the ways in which loss is manifested within the novels. Though they are varied, I think they perhaps point towards the expression of a greater, unmentionable loss of a not yet symbolically realized Latina/o consciousness. Having already been forced into proximity and "existence" by structural forces of globalization and empire, one can perhaps conceive of this literature as longing for the sense of collective consciousness that Latina/o communities lack. That is, having already been realized from without, perhaps we can read these novels as attempts to actualize a Latina/o consciousness from within. In this way, the possibility of the botánica as a site/sight in which Latina/o identity is realized would constitute

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she said. 'I'm doing it because I'm empty'" (81).

the solution to the sense of loss that neoliberal globalization's displacement of people has produced. The hybridity of the botánica in its syncretic religious practice of Santería as well as its double-codedness as a commercial-religious space presents a solution to the very particular spatio-temporal situation in which these novels are published. There is no Latina/o identity that has not been mediated by or constituted through unequal relations of power, including the market. Thus, the botánica as a symbol and product of transculturation functions as a productive site/sight for Latina/o identity.

CHAPTER THREE

When "Keeping it real" Goes Wrong: Helena María Viramontes's "The Moths" and Intimate Knowledge

I.

This chapter begins with an ending. The last page of Helena María Viramontes's short story "The Moths" (1984) relates the following image:

> I stepped into the bathtub one leg first, then the other. I bent my knees slowly to descend into the water slowly so I wouldn't scald her skin. There, there, Abuelita, I said, cradling her, smoothing her as we descended, I heard you. Her hair fell back and spread across the water like eagles' wings. The water in the tub overflowed and poured onto the tile of the floor. Then the moths came. Small gray ones that came from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom…The bathroom was filled with moths (32)

The sentences above depict a young Chicana's tender performance of a last rite for her recently deceased grandmother, paying careful attention to specific details so as to produce an image infused with emotion. Besides the narrative itself, it is the final act of care that the narrator performs for her Abuelita as she tends to her during her final days. In fact, I argue that the story not only seeks to re-present the

tenderness of this image but also to engage the reader in this particular mode of relation through its attention to visual and affective details. Just prior to this image, the narrator carefully relates the preparation of the bath and the final cleansing of her grandmother's body: "I returned to towel the creases of her stretch-marked stomach, her sporadic vaginal hairs, and her sagging thighs. I removed the lint from between her toes and noticed a mapped birthmark on the fold of her buttock" (31). The narrator's attention to these very intimate and mundane, almost vulgar, details of the body and of the slow descent into the bathtub full of water are meant to memorialize and shield the relation of her grandmother's death from an otherwise scalding narrative plunge. That is, there is a concern for how these procedures, including their narrative relation, will affect the body.[22] These details both shape the body and alter the reader's relation towards it. This affectiveness, somewhere between physical and emotional feeling, is not only important for the relationship between the narrator and her grandmother, but also for that between the writer-text and the reader-text. The writer includes these scenes in an attempt to honor the story;

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[22] Here I am drawn to Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of emotions as those feelings that accumulate on or "stick" to objects, including bodies, rather than simply residing within individuals (6-12). This conceptualization "allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace." (6) Thus, the concern for the affect of the

while the reader, likewise, must contend with this intimacy.

Then, of course, there are the gray moths that exit from the grandmother's body to fill the small bathroom. It is precisely because of these moths that I begin the chapter with an ending. During an informal conversation with Helena María Viramontes, she tells me that although some readers might be tempted to read it as such, this scene is *not* an example of "magical realism." According to Viramontes, she would not agree with such a reading and instead offers: "That's what *actually* happened!" It's my first year as a graduate student and I haven't even read the story in question. For weeks and months (now years) I had been curious about the meaning of Viramontes's claim. Why, I wonder, is it important for Viramontes to reject this particular interpretation, even when it is recognizing the story's challenge to oppressive logics of reason? Isn't fiction supposed to suspend or challenge conventional beliefs? Does she mean that she witnessed this event? Or that it "actually happened" as part of the story's organic development? These are some of the questions that originally animated this chapter and which it seeks to address, albeit somewhat obliquely by turning to other instances in which "The Moths" challenges different conventions: notions of space, food and gender.

There are two main goals of this chapter. The first is to think

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hot water on the grandmother's body in "The Moths" goes beyond

about the ways in which Helena María Viramontes's short story "The Moths" anticipates what many see as an ongoing enclosure of the alternative food movement in the U.S. that contradicts its principle characterization as a movement for all people, given that everyone eats food and deserves access to it (Slocum; Harper; Guthman; Arellano). In other words, I wonder how "The Moths" instructs ongoing conversations about the whiteness and other privileges that "stick" to and affect the structures of food. In caring for her dying Abuelita, the narrator tends to her home garden filled with alimentary and curative plants that she later uses in preparing meals in the kitchen. Thus, the relationship between food and space is central to the story. Taking note of the increasing popularity of "eco-conscious" urban homesteading and DIY (do-it-yourself) practices, like canning or urban gardening, amongst the post-2008 Recession white, middle class, cultural critic Gustavo Arellano pointedly asks: "what took you guys so long to become Mexican?" ("Mexicans Were the Original Frugalistas"). In other words, Arellano reminds these folks that those seemingly novel food practices are not so new and have long been necessary fixtures in the everyday survival strategies of the poor and immigrant. Thus, the only thing that's novel about these practices is who is performing them and why: "when young professionals and the socially

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physical sensation.

hip raise chickens in their backyards, newspapers do articles with slideshows. When Mexicans do it? People call code enforcement." Therefore, this chapter seeks to place "The Moths" in dialogue with a broad group of scholars who are thinking about the interdependent, structural relationships between race, class, food and geography. "The Moths" not only speaks to the intersection of these concepts, but also to the role that emotions play in shaping and forming these aspects of everyday life.

The second of the chapter's goals is to think about how and why the story's participation in these ongoing debates is itself already limited by its status as a tender narrative of Chicana fiction. "The Moths" appeals to emotions and feelings in its approach to understanding the meanings of food, space, gender and race. The story's narration is characterized by this intimate, almost mundane specificity and thus produces a sense of the *feeling* of multiple, intersecting social forces. Thus, it is not only the story's attention to the lives of those who "were never meant to survive" but precisely its careful relation of vulnerability, its invitation of the reader into what philosopher María Lugones calls the "limen"[23]—a liminal space—that

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[23] The "limen" is a conceptual space that articulates a liminal subject position, at the edge or borderlands of dominant structures of power, wherein one of necessity gains a praxical awareness of their own multiplicity and thus resists dominant, monological readings of reality (79).

makes it into a target of disciplinary action. I contend that Viramontes's story "keeps it real" in these intimate and dynamic representations of domestic space and labor. It doesn't "nail down" what gardening and cooking for working class Chicanas is *really* like, except in the sense that these are always determined by multiple, interdependent factors. In attending to these concepts with a tender, detailed approach, the narrative generates a sense of space, gender and labor that is opaque and multiple. Therefore, it is this attempt to move beyond straightforward explanations as well as the story's embrace of vulnerability, i.e. its attempts to keep it real, that single it out for dismissal as either "magical realist," stereotypical or untrue.

II.

The question about the stakes of reading "The Moths" as realist or not had been particularly present when I taught a course on contemporary U.S. Latina/o fiction that included Viramontes's short story and her novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007). In one instance, a student who identified as half white/half Latina contested the image of young Chicanos cruising East Los Angeles's Whittier Boulevard in low-riders in Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*. Wasn't this, she asked, a stereotypical representation of Latinos? Viramontes and her narrative, she feared, were perpetuating offensive representations of Latinos and therefore deserved to be called out as

such. In another instance, a second self-identified Latina student objected to the reference to "big asses" and cholos in *Their Dogs*. Still, a third student found it troubling that the women in Viramontes's *Their Dogs* and "The Moths" were so subservient and subjugated, that they did not (overtly) contest their relegation to domestic activities: knitting, cooking, gardening. Although, at first, my students' various questions about the authenticity of Viramontes's fiction or its critical strength seem unrelated, I argue that they are important to consider in order to avoid dismissing the work that her fiction performs and are perhaps related to Viramontes's pre-emptive rejection of a magical realist interpretation of "The Moths." The questions my students asked about the authentic or critical qualities of Viramontes's work, I argue, are the result of her attempt to "keep it real" by writing a form of fiction that carefully attends to the details of everyday struggles for poor women of color.

Guided by these initial questions, I've begun to think about other challenges to the authenticity of Viramontes's work and what such reactions reveal about the significance of working-class Chicana narratives. Relating a young Chicana's experiences with poverty, family abuse and sexism, I argue that "The Moths" represents an attempt on the author's part to "keep it real" by approaching such issues with careful attention. Moreover, that the story's tender

approach to poverty, sexism and violence reveals moments of autonomy and resistance within such conditions is another reason for acknowledging its realness. Thus, Viramontes's work encounters other significant challenges, including charges of perpetuating stereotypes, precisely because her stories focus on the lives of working class youth, immigrants, Chicanas, etc. Viramontes's objection to the magical realist mis-interpretation of "The Moths," therefore, is not out of any effort to declare her authorial status over the text's meaning. Rather, it is a defense against one in a series of attempts to dismiss the story for its attempt to keep it real. Challenges to the authenticity of "The Moths" reveal some of the politics involved in accepting such narratives as *just* fiction: as creative stories that offer sincere portraits of lives that are often un(der)represented and whose potentials for generating knowledge are frequently overlooked. In other words, we can understand these dismissals of "The Moths" and similar stories as the consequences of their attempts to keep it real against efforts to enclose the terrain of critical action and representation.

Part of why I am drawn to thinking about these examples from the classroom has to do with the in-ability and un-willingness to recognize the uncomfortable truths that Viramontes's fiction reveals, as well as the challenges that her work proposes by re-locating and re-identifying power. Though the first two critiques began as comments

on the historical accuracy of the novel, it became clear that the real trouble was with allowing such associations to be made with Latina/o identity. It wasn't just that the novel's images seemed un-historical or not real; the risk the two Latinas were articulating by alleging stereotype perpetuation was that such inaccuracies could be unfairly identified with the Latina/o community. In that sense, the charges of stereotype perpetuation also reveal something about the difficulty of recognizing and confronting privilege. These examples demonstrate in greater depth some of the risks involved with Viramontes's re-location and re-identification of power in working class Chicana spaces. Under a complex regime of racial, class and gender privileges that generally recognizes little, if any, value in the narratives of these lives, the accusations of stereotyping stand out as part of an attempt to disassociate from geographies and identities that have been historically marked as marginal and powerless.

Responding to similar claims about his own novel, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991), John Rechy relates an anecdote in the Introduction to his novel about an encounter with a Harvard graduate student who dismissed his novel on the grounds that the protagonist, an unquestioningly Catholic Chicana who enjoys telenovelas and suffers through a series of abusive relationships, represented a perpetuation of stereotypes about Mexican American

women (ix). Thinking on this recurring experience, Rechy responds:

> The word 'stereotype' makes me wince. Today, it carries such severe politically correct judgment that it becomes sinful to 'perpetuate stereotypes.' But the objects of such usually thoughtless judgment continue to exist, most often courageously on the front lines of oppression—easily spotted, easily derided. Yet, examined closely, those 'stereotypes' reveal a powerful source of enduring, often ancestral courage, even as, today, they challenge the insistence that they no longer exist. But they do, and they survive. Certainly, my Amalia continues to exist, an individual, and proudly so. (ix-x)

The surveillance for and identification of stereotypes, according to Rechy, functions to perform a discursive erasure of certain individuals from history that also has other material consequences. Not only does Rechy claim that allegations of stereotype made against Chicana/o literature typically originate in a classist, racist and sexist matrix of oppression, he goes even further to suggest that: "Quite often, even those who introduce the matter of stereotypes end up admiring Amalia. Perhaps, at first, young Mexican-Americans want to relegate to the past women like her…[or perhaps] they see parts of themselves in Amalia's dogged courage to overcome the strictures of her background"

(x). In other words, Rechy contends that sometimes those who are most critical of these marginalized forms of being are themselves the objects of such vilification. This practice becomes a form of self-discipline; by castigating stories like Amalia Gómez's, they simultaneously punish themselves for identifying with them. Moreover, I would add that Rechy's note also suggests that the power of literature by and about marginalized subjects lies in the affective attachment that it cultivates with the reader, the feeling of an intimate relation or identification with the characters and places portrayed in these stories. Thus, the effort of the Harvard graduate student to dismiss the character of Amalia Gómez on the grounds that she represents a perpetuation of Chicana stereotypes is simultaneously an attempt to deny any potential emotional attachment that the story may have cultivated with her. Taking up Ahmed's notion of an "affective economy" of emotions in circulation (8), we might read this situation as an example of the emotional *dis*-investment in particular forms of being.

This is the aspect of the novel that I find most rewarding and beautiful, and that I think fits well with the discussion about the threat of stereotype in Viramontes's fiction. Though Rechy doesn't necessarily claim it in this passage, part of the novel's project is to put pressure on the limits of the reader's compassion. Amalia's narrative—

much like that of many of Viramontes's female characters—is characterized by her painful experiences with racism and sexism. Left with few viable "choices" for directing her life as an un(der)educated Mexican American woman in the 1960s, for example, part of the narrative focuses on what seems to be a reluctant "submission" or "acceptance" of her lot as an abused and exploited housewife. And, yet, Amalia refuses to apologize for herself and proudly claims that she has no regrets in her life. But the novel also reveals that this is not because she has enjoyed in any way the abuse she has endured throughout her life. Rather, Amalia feels no shame because "she could remember no missed opportunity to regret. She could not remember a time when a desirable choice had been presented to her" (13). Does one feel pity or compassion for Amalia? Confronting these issues with a degree of frankness, the novel thus challenges the social, political, and racial limits of a reader's compassion. So long as Amalia is only understood as an often-married Chicana who seems prone to abusive lovers as a consequence of her own decisions—and therefore deserving of contempt—the reader will be unable to recognize any part of herself in Amalia's story. The failure to acknowledge and accept differences is what limits compassion and what subsequently results in a reader's castigation of Amalia (or Rechy) for perpetuating stereotypes by reproducing exactly those behaviors and images that are repudiated by

the dominant cultural order. As in the case of the Harvard graduate student, the claims of stereotyping made against Viramontes's fiction serve as an attempt to disavow the reality of these characters and any potential attachment to it.

Poor, working class Latina/o families know very well the material reality of poverty and are often discouraged from recognizing anything other than shame in that status, let alone their own power. This is to say that the hegemony that Viramontes's oeuvre powerfully challenges by providing the reader with the opportunity to slow down and consider, if only for the moment of reading, to what degree one might identify with and *feel* these marginal positions differently is constituted in great part through the circulation and attachment of shame to certain practices and forms of being. Presented the prospect of identifying with a community that is too often derided and neglected, my students perhaps felt that they *could not* allow themselves (or others) to recognize something familiar about the narratives they were reading. Under a particular classist and racist regime, doing so would have meant risking an identification with that position of shame and rejection, unless they accepted the opportunity that Viramontes's narrative was extending to them: to re-think the hegemonic conventions of interpreting images of Chicana/o youth cruising in low-riders; of women in domestic spaces; of general

working class life as honorable rather than shameful. Therefore, it is possible to see a correlation between the critiques made by students and the politics of identifying as working class or Latina/o.

In this way, I read the criticisms of "The Moths" and other similar works of Latina/o fiction as a form of disciplinary action, against narratives that keep it real. It is a method of eliminating certain experiences from the historical record, by qualifying them as stereotypical, magical, or simply untrue. More specifically, the experiences that are under attack by this form of discipline in "The Moths" are the everyday methods of survival practiced by poor women of color in many urban areas of the U.S. In other words, these critiques seek to eliminate the potential that the story has for producing critical knowledge about the intersections of gender, race, food, class and space.

III.

In Viramontes's "The Moths" an unnamed narrator-protagonist provides a retrospective account of her experiences as a 14-year-old girl caring for her dying grandmother in her final days. In part, she takes up this task out of a belief in fairness in the exchange of care. "Abuelita had pulled me through the rages of scarlet fever by placing, removing and replacing potato slices on the temples of my forehead" (27). Thus, "it seemed only fair" to take care of Abuelita in her final

days. At the same time, the work of caring for and working with her grandmother presents an opportunity for the young girl to escape the violence she experiences at home with her two parents and older sisters. Recounting her aversion to Mass, she explains how her father "would pound his hands on the table, rocking the sugar dish or spilling a cup of coffee and scream…grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism" (29). By contrast, working with her Abuelita brings a sense of comfort and belonging to the narrator: "although we hardly spoke, hardly looked at each other as we worked over root transplants, I always felt her gray eye on me. It made me feel, in a strange sort of way, safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel" (28).

I argue that the story "keeps it real" not only in the sense that it portrays real(istic) images of everyday life, but also in the sense that the narrative actively works to re-define the terms by and through which one might understand gender, race, class, space and food. It pushes for a complex and multifaceted understanding of these concepts. On the one hand, one might interpret the story as an example of the ways in which gender, space, food and class intersect to enclose women within domestic spaces and to produce uneven geographies of food. While this approach to the text recognizes the story's documentary quality, the truth that the story reveals is not that

people are oppressed but rather that poor women of color survive and, indeed, thrive against such structural forces. Further, I argue that resistance to and liberation from these structural forces is not only a material reality to be measured outside of ourselves, but something that is also felt, experienced and embodied. By suggesting that the story keeps it real, then, I am arguing that it must also engage these more subjective aspects of resilience and truth. In particular, "The Moths" accomplishes this by reclaiming domestic spaces and labor that have historically operated to marginalize and oppress women as critical for the articulation of *different* forms of autonomy and agency.

In the narrator's immediate home, she is marginalized by her older sisters for her inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to perform the chores of a very particular femininity, defined by crocheting and embroidery, thereby rendering her an alien subject. The narrator regrets her "bull hands" because they physically inhibit her ability to perform these tasks and therefore her ability to count as a legitimate subject in the house:

> My hands were too big to handle the fineries of crocheting or embroidery and I always pricked my fingers or knotted my colored threads time and time again while my sisters laughed and called me bull hands with their cute waterlike voices. So I began keeping a piece of jagged brick

> in my sock to bash my sisters or anyone who called me bull hands. (27)

We witness here, then, a violent contest over the meaning of femininity as a mode of belonging in her house. It's not for a lack of trying that the narrator cannot perform the same kind of femininity that her sisters "with their cute waterlike voices" effectively manage. The narrator appreciates that these activities represent "fineries," which one might master, rather than something one does naturally, granted they didn't have "bull hands" like hers. To a degree, then, those bull hands are themselves shaped by the emotions attached to them from these encounters.

In her Abuelita's house, however, those same "bull hands" change their signification from markers of her foreignness to a positive affirmation of her being:

> I peeled the skins off and put the flimsy, limp-looking green and yellow chiles in the molcajete and began to crush and crush and twist and crush the heart out of the tomato, the clove of garlic, the stupid chiles that made me cry, crushed them until they turned into liquid under my bull hand. With a wooden spoon, I scraped hard to destroy the guilt, and my tears were gone. (30)

As one of my students half-jokingly put it, the domestic labor of

cooking here is transformed from a sign of subjugation to an example of self-administered therapy; crushing chiles and tomatoes in a molcajete as a rasquachista alternative to seeing a counselor or psychiatrist who, in any case, might be economically and/or socially unaffordable. That is, the image takes on a quality of radical self-care insofar as we understand the narrator as vulnerable and precarious to forces of capital, sexism and racism. Between the images of the narrator's pounding of the molcajete and her inability to embroider or crochet, then, there is an ongoing contest and complication of what defines domestic labor. There is a particular concern for the value that each form has in terms of securing a sense of social belonging.

We find another similar and important example of this transformative definition of domestic labor and space in the grandmother's home garden, where the narrator uses her bull hands to "up-cycle" used coffee cans into planters for a variety of staples indigenous to Mexican foodways and space:

> I would puncture holes in the bottom of the coffee cans with a nail and a precise hit of a hammer. This completed, my job was to fill [the Hills Brothers coffee cans] with red clay mud from beneath her rose bushes, packing it softly, then making a perfect hole, four fingers round, to nest a sprouting avocado pit, or the spidery sweet potatoes that

> Abuelita rooted in mayonnaise jars with toothpicks and daily water, or prickly chayotes that produced vines that twisted and wound all over her porch pillars, crawling to the roof, up and over the roof, and down the other side, making her small brick house look like it was cradled within the vines that grew pear-shaped squashes ready for the pick, ready to be steamed with onions and cheese and butter. The roots would burst out of the rusted coffee cans and search for a place to connect. (28)

I cite this section at length to draw attention to the ways in which the narrative defines domestic labor and spaces as examples of autonomy and liberation. The cultivation of these plants is not just any activity meant to keep her bull hands busy and productive; the resonance of the chayote, the avocado and the sweet potato (or camote) with indigenous Mexico allows for a reading of this as a type of labor that performs a re- appreciation of indigeneity as a counterhegemonic act (Saldívar-Hull) or a "transnationalization" of East Los Angeles (Mares and Peña). Read as a sign of indigenous Mexican identity, the vines of the chayote literally "cradle" the home and the people within it, providing a provocative example of the "socio-spatial dialectic" (Soja). Not only do people generate and organize space, but space also exercises an agency in the configuration of people. The grandmother's

garden nourishes the women in both a material and a cultural sense. It is as much about cultivating food as it is about a cultivation of the self, a combination of homemaking and self-making that disrupts any natural sense of either, especially when the house she shares with her parents and sisters is defined by violence and exclusion.[24]

These domestic spaces of the grandmother's home are therefore utopic in contrast to her parents' house, including the church and the market, all of which communicate a sense of alienation. Take for example the following description of the church:

> Across the street from Jay's Market there was a chapel. I never knew its denomination, but I went in just the same to search for candles. I sat down on one of the pews because there were none. After I cleaned my fingernails, I looked up at the high ceiling. I had forgotten the vastness of these places, the coolness of the marble pillars and the frozen statues with blank eyes. I was alone. I knew why I had never returned. (29)

To be sure, part of the reason why the narrator doesn't attend mass

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[24] See *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* (1996) for more examples of the ways in which the concept of home is constantly renegotiated and reconstructed in writing by various women, especially Cecelia Lawless's "Helena Maria Viramontes's Homing Devices in *Under the Feet of Jesus*," and Sylvia Bowerbank and Dolores Wawagesia Wawia's "Wild Lessons: Native Ecological Wisdom in Ruby Slipperjack's Fiction."

can be attributed to her father's authoritarianism. But here too, the narrator *know*s that she never returned because of chapel's "vastness" and "the coolness of the marble pillars and the frozen statues with blank eyes." These architectural aspects of the built environment silently, though no less effectively, communicate to her the message that she does not belong in this place;[25] a place that feels more like a mausoleum than it does a place of communion. By contrast, she likes her Abuelita's porch because "it was shielded by the vines of the chayotes and I could get a good look at the people and car traffic on Evergreen without them knowing" (29). Once again, the chayote vines provide shelter and protection, but also a sense of perspective from which to see and interpret the world.

Creating planters out of used coffee cans, planting seedlings and pounding tomatoes with a molcajete make use of her bull hands and generate an alternative sense of belonging that is still marked by her femininity, her working class status and her indigenous Mexican heritage. She's not, in other words, preparing these foods and gardening in this way to be "hip," as Arellano would point out, but more specifically out of her particular subject position within a matrix

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[25] Both Ocean Howell's "The Poetics of Security" and Mike Davis's "Fortress L.A." provide interesting discussions of the concrete ways in which architecture and other forms of urban design configure and regulate social interactions, inviting certain activities and actors while simultaneously excluding others.

of social forces. The performance of these activities cultivates her particular working class Chicana identity.

Although it is interesting to recognize how the cultivation of the home garden and the preparation of fresh food reproduce certain Mexican ethno-cultural traditions it is also important to note the way in which these activities also function as practices of "food justice" (Holt-Gimenez) and "the right to the city" (Harvey), against the context of the unequal production of space and food in late capitalist U.S. As the narrator mentions at another point in the story: "Jay's," the local corner market, "didn't have much of anything. The tomatoes were always soft and the cans of Campbell soups had rusted spots on them. There was dust on the tops of cereal boxes" (30). No doubt familiar to anyone who has spent time in an American ghetto, Jay's is an example of the uneven geography of food. In this context the grandmother's garden exemplifies the interdependent relation between cultural and material strategies of survival, wherein the reproduction of the grandmother's cultural traditions cannot be divorced from her material survival.

Indeed, the story's attention to ethno-culturally specific foods and plants generates an important resonance with the long-running and ongoing colonial history of food that, on the one hand, has resulted in the commodification and global exchange of foods native to

colonized territories (coffee, chocolate, tomatoes, potatoes, chiles, etc.) and, on the other, continually creates hierarchies of what does or doesn't qualify as food in tandem with definitions of culture, civilization and human (Serrato). The scenes of the narrator gardening and cooking with her Abuelita, as well as references to her grandmother's natural remedies reveal what Sonia Saldívar-Hull calls the story's "counterhegemonic reclamation of a discarded indigenous culture" (134).

Returning to the connection with the domestic labor and space, I want to put pressure on the way that we read these scenes and suggest that we appreciate their radical nature; that we acknowledge that in these scenes, we are witnessing a redefinition of domestic labor and domestic spaces. Whereas writers like Michael Pollan make semi-inflated remarks about the subversiveness of home cooking and home gardening—stating that "in our time, cooking from scratch and growing your own food qualify as subversive acts" (200)—I think the example of these women truly proves such an insurgency, perhaps in more ways than Pollan's book can allow us to consider. These women qualify for that subversive distinction, albeit in a different way than Pollan might suggest. As with many people who do these things either out of necessity or out of tradition, these women do not give themselves the badges of honor that Pollan suggests they deserve

because it means something different for Latinas/os or other brown bodies to identify as "radical" or "subversive." That working class people do these things can be interpreted, along the lines of Pollan, as a way of proving their power against a capitalist, market-based food system whose logical conclusion is an uneven access to food, represented geographically by zones of food insecurity alongside neighborhoods with incredible amounts of access to healthy, fresh, organic and/or fair-trade food products. But, even then, working class folks of color do not have the same access to the meaning of the word "subversive" as would Pollan or other white, middle class alternative foodies.

IV.

Briefly stepping away from "The Moths," it is important to note the ways that thinking about food, race and urban geography together provides a fruitful arena of discussion for the story. Books such as Julie Guthman's *Agrarian Dreams* (2004); Robert Gottlieb's and Anupama Joshi's *Food Justice* (2010); Alison Hope Alkon's and Julian Agyeman's *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability* (2011; and Rachel Slocum's and Arun Saldanha's *Geographies of Race and Food* (2013) are part of a growing dialogue around the relationship between food, race and geography with a particular eye towards keeping food justice movements accountable. These scholars are not

only thinking about the political economy of space or food, but also about the racial dynamics inherent to both. While there is generally an awareness of the ways in which capitalism produces uneven access to food and space—e.g., ghettos as "food deserts"—there is still work to be done to map out the relationship between racial privilege and the uneven production of these same foodscapes (Guthman; Slocum; Harper). Thus, these scholars recognize the significant degrees to which colonialism and racial privilege have been historically entrenched in the production of food that it is nearly impossible to disassociate discussions about "good-vs-bad" or "healthy-vs-unhealthy" food from the production of racial differences and hierarchies. These are the inherent processes that Gustavo Arellano articulates in his piece about the new "frugalistas." It is something, too, that the South Central Farmers in Los Angeles were aware of in their struggles to defend their fourteen-acre urban farm.[26] The right to the city as well as food justice are both defined in complex ways that can include class, race, gender and sexuality so that people are denied these rights for multiple reasons.

Cultural anthropologists Teresa Mares and Devon Peña have recently written on urban farms in the U.S. and the significant insight

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[26] See *The Garden* documentary on the fight against the displacement of one of the largest urban farms in the U.S., cultivated by and for local Latina/o families of South Central Los Angeles.

that they provide to combining a framework of the right to the city with food sovereignty (or the right to determine one's own foodways). Focusing specifically on the South Central Farm in Los Angeles and the Marra Farm in Seattle, both of which are cultivated by mostly Latina/o growers, Mares and Peña contend that urban farms perform a "formidable resistance to neo-liberal enclosure and privatization of urban common spaces" (245). Projects like these urban community gardens contest neoliberal understandings of urban space as dead or inert space that can be easily mapped and divided into exchangeable units of property. They reframe the city landscape as something more dynamic and relational. As Mares and Peña note:

> Against the surveillance grids, jacked-up ecological footprints, and fragmented echoes of failed suburbia that define the post-Fordist cities of neo-liberal dreams, inner-city urban forms are being reinvented and reshaped from the bottom up through the spreading multitude of heterotopias, the diverse shifting mosaic of cultural forms that everywhere transform space into place. (252)

In other words, Mares and Peña push us to acknowledge the "alternative" urban forms that are being imagined and produced precisely by those folks whose access to the status of "subversive" or "radical" is compromised. For them, the South Central and Marra

farms reveal the always ongoing struggles to define a place. Mares and Peña refer to this particular process of place making as "autotopography—self-telling through place-shaping" (246), by which the Latina/o and immigrant farmers culturally and materially cultivate themselves through the farming and harvesting of the land in their own likeness. Mares and Peña focus on these Latina/o immigrant farms for what they reveal about alternative conceptualizations of food and spatial production. For instance, they remark on the use of cactus fencing that began to emerge alongside the chain-link fencing used to subdivide family garden plots as it suggests "a transition to a more culturally appropriate division of the space through a permaculture feature similar to the *nopal* (cactus) fences that are more common traditional fixtures of the vernacular landscape across rural areas of northern Mexico" (247). Mares and Peña interpret this as "a more natural set of boundaries that were both enjoyable and useful to the gardeners. Their approach was to make the 'fence' part of an edible landscape" (247). In other words, these are just some of the strategies that folks practice as a matter of exercising their right to define the city on their own terms in everyday life. Thus, as a consequence, we can understand the city council's decision to approve the re-sale of the land back to the previous owner (without the farmers' consent) and evict the farmers (despite a large protest movement) as an act of

protecting access to the city as a privilege, rather than a right.

The cultivation of ethno-culturally traditional foods in these urban gardens functions as a cultivation of the self in both a material and discursive sense, just as we see in "The Moths." Exercising their right to define food as more than a commodity, but as something that is deeply tied to their ethno-cultural identities, the farmers are simultaneously performing their right to (define) the city and their food. What makes "The Moths" different in this regard is that it not only represents this act of cultivation, but that it also performs it through its tender approach. The careful attention the narrator pays to the affective attachments to space and food is a mode of defining these not only in material terms, but also emotionally significant. Her narrative cultivates a sense of the ways in which we are susceptible to being affected by our interaction with food, space and others.

V.

Within the context of ongoing battles over the meaning and production of urban space and food, "The Moths" provides some critical insights into the history of what is now fashionably termed ecologically-conscious urban forms, revealing the ways in which these meanings are mediated over and through gender, race, and class. The story also engages in a critical re-definition of what domestic spaces and labor activities mean in terms of power and agency for two

Chicana women cultivating their own autotopographies in East Los Angeles. Unlike other accounts of struggles over food sovereignty, the right to the city or autonomy, the story's careful and emotionally attentive narration addresses the affective inflection of these issues. At the same time, however, it is precisely this cultivation of vulnerability, the story's tenderness, that challenges normative claims about epistemology and social relations. The story's attempt to keep it real goes wrong when we fail to answer its ethical call to be susceptible and open to it, including its claims regarding the reality of everyday experiences for poor and working class Latinas in the U.S. I take these insights from reading Viramontes's "The Moths" to inform a pedagogy of tenderness, of learning and teaching oneself to be vulnerable to others. This strategy of learning and teaching by being vulnerable and open to others is as applicable inside my classroom as it is outside.

CHAPTER FOUR

KNITTING OUR WAY TO REVOLUTION: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF CREATIVE WORK AND H.G. CARRILLO'S *LOOSING MY ESPANISH*

I.

In this chapter I'd like to consider the ways in which definitions of care, work, and struggle are political. What constitutes care, struggle, or work, as well as who performs any of these roles, are questions that are determined through ongoing contests over power. The dimension of tender struggles that will be explored here is the struggle *for* tenderness, both in the sense of care as well as political methodology. That is, of the ways in which it becomes increasingly important within social movements and activist groups to pay attention to the needs of activist bodies and how such an attention can also function as a form of political action in and of itself. I begin by considering how these concepts are deployed within activist and social movement discourses, highlighting the complexity of defining and realizing these ideas.

The complexities of these efforts, I argue, demands creativity. This imaginative work will permit a more successful accounting for the various needs within a reality of multiple forms of oppression. I turn to black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory" and queer black feminist thinker Audre Lorde's "Poetry Is Not

a Luxury" as foundational examples of theorizing the radical potential of creative and literary writing, pushing on the ways in which these might help us to think about notions of care and its provision. Attuned to contingent and relational nature of knowledge and liberation, both Christian and Lorde theorize the specific potential of stories for marginalized subjects. Finally, then, I share a reading of H.G. Carrillo's *Loosing My Espanish* (2004), in which I highlight the insights the novel has for thinking about critical strategies of survival against multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. Carrillo's novel, I argue, instructs the reader in a critical methodology that is rooted in a sense of tense intimacy. If care, struggle, and work are all defined and realized in contingent and relational terms, I'm arguing that *Loosing My Espanish* as a tender narrative performs its own kind of care work that is also inherently political.

II.

In attempts to frame different forms of oppression as systemic rather than as a series of isolated events one claim that is often made is that there is no true "outside" to hetero-sexism, racism, or capitalism. That is, in a systemic account of misogyny, for instance, one must be able to recognize that it affects (negatively) everyone—men, women, trans people—even if there are real, material differences to the ways in which the effects of this sexism are felt according to

one's gender identification. Speaking of another context of oppression, Brazilian liberation theologian Paulo Freire speaks of oppression as the dehumanization of not only the oppressed, but also of the oppressor. In the first instance, dehumanization is the result of the oppressors' sense of superiority and belief in a hierarchy of humanity. And although there are very real, material benefits to such a system of belief, Freire seeks to underline that participation in that ideological framework is itself harmful to the oppressor, that s/he is also afflicted by the same poisonous thought. "As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized" (56). Thus, although Freire stresses the importance of recognizing the historical material realities that form the basis of struggles for liberation, he also argues that true liberation (as humanization) can only be achieved as a collective struggle that would include the oppressors themselves. Similarly, one encounters in protest discourse claims about "cultures" of racism or sexism that permeate a community or about these forms of oppression as being present in the air one breathes, pressing the point that no one escapes either from the responsibility of fighting against these forms of oppression or of being affected by them. And, yet, what sometimes gets lost or forgotten in these accounts of the ways in which different forms of oppression operate systemically is that these are experienced

differently and not in isolation from one another. Sexism is certainly differently experienced by those identified as trans, masculine, or feminine, but furthermore distinctly by those who are trans and of color or white, femme, and gay. What this means, then, is that strategies for addressing one or another form of oppression are always contingent and relational: they will depend on a variety of factors and how they relate to one another.

In an essay titled "An End to Self-Care" B. Loewe an organizer and writer calls for the death of "self-care" in favor of the "birth [of] a newer discussion of community care." As part of a critical conversation hosted by the website *Organizing Upgrade*[27] on activist burnout and the place of (self)care in political organizing Loewe shares his frustration with what he sees as "an importation of middle-class values of leisure" in discussions of self-care that individualizes and de-politicizes the activities that are necessary for sustaining those involved in collective organizing and social movements. "As long as self-care is discussed as an individual responsibility and additional task, it will be something that middle-class people with leisure time will most easily relate to and will include barriers to the lives of people without time to spare." Here, then, Loewe begins to elaborate on some

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[27] *Organizing Upgrade* is a website that promotes itself as dedicated to providing a space for critical discussions about strategies and ongoing struggles between organizers and activists from various causes.

of the politics involved in the provision of and definition of care. Care is what all bodies need in order to sustain themselves. However, unless the provision of care is understood and acknowledged as a responsibility that is collectively shared, it will inevitably be left available/accessible only to those that can afford it (in economic, political, and/or social terms). That is, the denial or inaccessibility of care (especially on a collective level) is a political question; it is distributed along lines of power and privilege. To demand care for oneself from others is a political and ethical call.[28] For Loewe, "Movement work *is* healing work" (emphasis in original); or at least it should be. That is, the work of a movement can be regarded as the quest for securing those conditions (political, economic, social, etc.) that are necessary for sustaining the mobilized group in question, as well as the provision of those same conditions. As an example of this, Loewe points to Don Andrés, a day laborer who consistently arrives to organizing meetings after a full day of construction work and, as a consequence of such a long day of work, routinely falls asleep at these

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[28] Evelyn Nakano Glenn's "Creating a Caring Society" is particularly useful here. As she explains: "even those we see as fully independent—that is, able to care for themselves in terms of 'activities of daily living'—may for reasons of time or energy or temporary condition need care to maintain their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being…The difference [between these so-called autonomous subjects and those deemed 'dependent'] is that 'independent adults' may preserve their sense of independence if they have sufficient resources,

gatherings. “Being at the meeting,” Loewe insists, “was self-care,” even, apparently, if this means being *asleep* at the meeting. Loewe continues:

> Even for someone like myself who has the majority of my material needs met, I feel most alive, most on fire, most able to go around the clock, when I’m doing political work that feels authentic, feels like it pushes the bounds of authority, and feels like it is directly connected to advancing my individual and our collective liberation.

In other words, what Loewe suggests is an erasure of the distinction between what might be called the personal and the political in the sense that political work (e.g. organizing workers and campaigns) should simultaneously take care of a body’s particular or personal needs. If the political work is “authentic,” it should be able to sustain one’s body and provide it the necessary energy for continuing that work. Organizing in this instance is posited as one in a series of other activities—including, presumably, eating and sleeping—meant to nourish and thereby reproduce our bodies in order to continue performing future work. According to this logic, authentic movement work cannot (or at least should not) be a *reason* for needing care since it is the necessary care itself. Indeed, what Loewe suggests might be

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economic or social, to ‘command’ care from others, rather than being

described as a virtuous cycle of movement work, where such activities are never really extra or apart from what is politically demanded and, thus, may be said to integrate what is often differentiated from the political or material as "personal."

There is a lot to agree with in Loewe's contextualization of the relationship between the personal and the political. By now, it is perhaps a somewhat obvious and well-accepted truism that the personal (or, in fact, *everything*) is political. The very conceptualization of the difference between a personal sphere and a public one is itself an idea already bound up in an ongoing contest over who does or does not belong in the public, as well as what activities may be performed within these spheres. In this regard, then, I'm not suggesting anything particularly noteworthy of Loewe's conceptualization of organizing as care work. What I am particularly interested in, however, is *how* Loewe distinguishes between "authentic" and "in-authentic" forms of care, i.e. between those that address both the political and the personal and those that only address the personal. In making these distinctions, Loewe emphasizes the collective and political nature of the fatigue that social activists feel, which therefore necessitates an equally cooperative and politically attuned methodology of care. "The fact that you're tired and asking yourself how you're going to keep going, is not

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beholden to relatives or charity" (87).

unique to you," he writes. "The answer to that question isn't [individual] either." The suggestion here being that the fatigue felt by organizers and activists is one that is historically produced and can therefore be traced back to its origin so as to mobilize a collective response. In other words, the fatigue of a given mobilization might in fact be a product of forces countering its very existence. Thus, the work of mobilizing is intimately linked to the group's care.

But, to return to Loewe's example above, how is Don Andrés's "presence" at the organizing meetings truly a form of participation in the movement? Loewe's essay leaves this question open. What he does suggest, however, is that the "crisis of care" in social movement organizing is a matter of maintaining the connection between the vehicles and tools of a movement and its purpose. Therefore, "burnout" or fatigue is not, according to Loewe, a consequence of the *amount* of work being done or the conditions under which it is performed but rather it is the result of doing the "wrong" activities, i.e. those that are not properly geared towards and shaped by the movement's needs. "The deeper question is how do we shape our struggles so that they are life-giving instead of energy-taking processes" (Loewe). He asks: "When did activities that are aimed to move us closer to freedom stop moving us?"

Up to this point, Loewe's argument is on point with much of my

own thinking on this and that of other folks theorizing care and movements and care as movement. [references?] However, where I (and others)[29] depart from Loewe's analysis is on the precise definitions of "energy-taking" and "life-giving" activities; that is, between the "right" kinds of movement work and the "wrong" kinds of labor/struggle. "The truth is," Loewe claims, "that we cannot knit our way to revolution." Likewise, "no amount of yoga or therapy or comfort food we supplement our work with will compensate" for the fact that these are inadequate to the task-at-hand.

Why does Loewe single out these particular activities? What movement or revolutionary horizon do they forestall? If knitting won't get us to revolution, what, if anything, does it do? What is at stake here is not necessarily a determination of a given activity's absolute or universal value for social movement organizing, but rather the need to recognize the relative value of all kinds of activities for such purposes. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha notes in her critical response to Loewe's piece, as much as he attempts to address some of the ongoing political stakes of differentiating care from leisure, he nevertheless reproduces other assumptions, especially about gender,

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[29] For a particularly incisive critique of Loewe's assumptions of gender and ability, see Leah Lakshmi-Samarasinha's essay "For a Badass Disability Justice, Working-Class and Poor-Led Models of Sustainable Hustling for Liberation" in the same "Community Care" conversation on *Organizing Upgrade*.

culture, and ability, by making some blanket statements like those quotes above. As Piepzna-Samarasinha points out, the imagination of strategies for resilience that are centered and focused must be as diverse as the needs that different kinds of bodies have. She goes on to list a series of "Badass resilience strategies of loud-ass working class femme of color laughter and shit taking, organizing that centers what our bodies can actually do." In other words, what Piepzna-Samarasinha points out is the multiple and often intersecting political struggles for care and sustainability that occur simultaneously and demand their own particular methodologies. There is no reason to dismiss *tout court* yoga, comfort food, or knitting as antithetical to movement work. While they *can* function as activities evacuated of (a particular) political direction, this does not mean that they do not also function in another political direction.

I highlight this conversation from *Organizing Upgrade* not because it is necessarily unique, but precisely because it is demonstrative of the (sometimes unspoken) debates that shape and inform the decisions made by activists and organizers in their efforts to generate a more just transformation of social relations, the environment, legal systems, etc. Although they do not always appear as deliberately as they do through the various articles on *Organizing Upgrade*, I have witnessed these discussions about the meaning of

political work operate as a latent force within many activist and organizing circles. The articulation of these differences in the definition or valuation of work, struggle, and care is of critical importance to social movements, especially when considering the various degrees and forms of precariousness that characterize people's experiences. Though some forms of activist or movement discourse often claim that everyone suffers under capitalist, sexist, and/or racist systems of power relations, it is not necessarily true that this pain is distributed uniformly across geographies or bodies; nor are the consequent risks of challenging or transgressing such oppressive regimes equally, or even similarly, spread out. In other words, to say that a reparative form of social activism must of necessity be collective does not necessarily address the ways in which bodies hurt or suffer differently and, consequently, require unique forms of care(work).

Here, I can recall a particular experience of organizing with a diverse group of student activists that involved both undergraduate and graduate members, first-generation college students and working class, as well as middle class students, women of color and hetero white men. Though we all came together with the intention of organizing responses to especially racist and heterosexist actions and "cultures" on campus, it was clear that we all experienced these facets of the campus social order much differently from one another. In

particular, there was a contrast between the folks of color in the group and two white hetero men, where the former felt that a particular need for them, beyond the organization and execution of direct actions, was the formation and maintenance of a radical community or family, a space where we could vent *all* of our concerns without being made to feel as though we were "crazy" or "mad." At meetings of the group, the folks of color and women tended to prefer spending more time asking each other about our lives and affairs rather than simply gathering to plan and coordinate a demonstration, a critical *communiqué*, or some other form of direct action. This created some tension where mostly the two white hetero men (but also others) would feel as though the critical potential of our group was being lost.

What I'm attempting to illustrate with this very brief anecdote is how priorities and radical politics are defined along particular forms of differences. Although not everyone might (have) agree(d), I believe that the attempts to "check in" with one another, to learn about each other's lives were in and of themselves already part of a radical politics for the constitution of a caring community against various logics that would rather keep (radical) folks of color from coming together to form bonds. To paraphrase Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival," these attempts were radical in that they were orientated towards ensuring the survival of a community that was never meant to be.

Thus, for many activists, part of establishing effective movement strategies and discourses requires organizers to be(come) aware of the multiple ideological forces that shape and form our subjectivities and vulnerabilities with respect to dominant relations of power.[30] Loewe's particular imagination of what constitutes movement work or care work, in other words, is informed by his own subject position and, without a particular effort on his part to work against these assumptions, it fails to see some of the ways in which he privileges certain actions at the expense of others. That which is effective or authentic care or movement work is contingent upon, or limited by, what is imaginable or conceivable in terms of vulnerability, injury, pain, etc. This work, of imagining and conceiving of other forms of pain (i.e. empathy), takes place within the same uneven and contested field of politics.

III.

Women of color have theorized the critical role of literary or creative writing and storytelling for liberation. The historical and social contexts of the lives of women, people of color, and other marginalized people have made it so that we must privilege sites of cultural

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[30] See Kimberlé Crenshaw's pivotal essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writing that Formed the Movement*. Eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, et al. New York: The New Press, 1995: 357-83.

production as sites of critical knowledge production. However, I want to be careful about to underline that saying that fiction or poetry can also be "revelatory distillations of experience," does not necessarily mean that those distillations (poems, stories, novels, etc.) are transparent or identical to one another in their form. That is, that there is something about the writing or reading process of the stories themselves that determines their degree of utility as forms of knowing or theorizing.

In her essay on "The Race for Theory" literary critic Barbara Christian calls out academe's turn away from direct engagement with literary works and their authors towards a concern with abstract theories. Originally published in the spring 1987 edition of the journal *Cultural Critique*, Christian's essay plays off of Cold War-era discourse both in the title and in her estimation of literary criticism's turn to theory. What is especially concerning to Christian is the coincidence of this turn with a historical moment in which the literature of women, the Third World and U.S. writers of color began to gain some prominence in the publishing industry (68, 71). In other words, Christian suggests that it is too coincidental to observe that the moment when literary critics begin to turn away from the particularities of literature is the same as that in which there is a greater representation of marginalized subjects in literature. Against

the growing tide of critical theorists whose writing diminishes the value of literary work, Christian reaffirms the significance of language and literature, especially as a mode of theorizing for people of color in the U.S.:

> For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (68)

Here, Christian suggests one of the ways in which literary writing, especially by people of color, must be evaluated differently according to specific social and historical conditions. Dynamic stories, narratives and the play of language are particularly meaningful as modes of theorizing for people of color precisely because of institutionalized forms of racism. That is, their quality as "alternative" (to Western) forms of thinking becomes apparent when considered against the grain of history: of exclusion from institutions of knowing,

of the rejection of alternative modes of social relation. Where women, people of color, and other folks have been denied participation in official or legitimized forms of theorizing, this has meant that these folks have maintained and reproduced their own methods of knowing in other spaces. As Chicana feminist scholar Sonia Saldívar-Hull puts it, "Hegemony has so constructed the ideas of method and theory that often we cannot recognize anything that is different from what the dominant discourse constructs" (46). She adds: "As a consequence, we have to look in nontraditional places for our [Chicana feminist] theories: in the prefaces to anthologies, in the interstices of autobiographies, in our cultural artifacts (the cuentos), and, if we are fortunate enough to have access to a good library, in the essays published in marginalized journals not widely distributed by the dominant institutions" (46). Following Christian, Saldívar-Hull recognizes that stories have a different epistemological and political valence in communities of color. The creativity of literary work, or its theoretical potential, becomes necessary for the historical and continued survival of people of color. And it is precisely for this reason that it must be approached in a more direct mode than has become fashionable in certain academic circles.

Similarly, Audre Lorde's essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" underlines the way in which poetry as a mode of expressing knowledge

through feelings has been undermined by a racist and sexist epistemology that hierarchically distinguishes reason as superior to feeling. “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (38). As with Christian, it is within a particularly gendered and racialized regime of power that emotions and poetry are repressed as illegitimate forms of knowing or sensing the world. For Lorde, poetry is “a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean” (37). Thus, Lorde continues:

> For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (37)

Lorde’s definition of poetry as “vital necessity” and “revelatory distillation of experience” is bound with an acknowledgement and honoring of women of color’s resilience and survival in the face of

oppression. In these lines, Lorde attempts to recuperate poetry as a vehicle for the survival and transformation of women of color. That is, Lorde underlines the emancipating potential of poetry in a struggle against social forces bent on the destruction of women of color's bodies, experiences, and knowledges.

Despite the tones of revolutionary or political rhetoric, Lorde's explication of poetry's emancipatory role is not programmatic. Though it is clear what function Lorde sees poetry achieving for women of color, she does not make a particular mention about its form. As with Christian, it seems more appropriate to take Lorde to mean that this definition of poetry is relational and contingent. I emphasize this fact in order to make it clear that I don't think that there is an intrinsically revolutionary form of poetry or language. Nor do I think that Lorde is suggesting such an idea. What is most important is the kind of relationship women of color develop with emotions and with poetry as a consequence of their particular position at the intersections of racialized and gendered vectors of power. It becomes imperative for Lorde and Christian to underline this function of poetry and creative language for people of color only insofar as these are marginalized (as) sources of knowledge, power, and resilience. This insight, therefore, is especially important for considerations of tender narratives.

IV.

H.G. Carrillo's novel *Loosing My Espanish* tells the story of Óscar Delossantos, a Cuban American history teacher at a Jesuit high school in a diverse Latina/o neighborhood in Chicago. As evidenced by the novel's title, loss is one of it's central themes: Óscar's lover Aureliano Francisco García Carrera has died, his mother has developed symptoms of a mental disease that affect her recall, and he is being fired from his job.[31] But, again, as the title playfully suggests, loss is also an experience of being unmoored from those things that anchor one to a place, which itself can be a positive or negative process. Besides the fact that the reader is addressed directly by the novel's narrator-protagonist, Óscar Delossantos,—a feature of the novel that, I argue, produces a demand of the reader that is comparable to those produced by testimonio narratives—there are important moments in *Loosing My Espanish* that emphasize ideas of interconnectivity and differential modes of meaning-making. I thus argue that the novel challenges linear-colonialist understandings of history and the production of meaning or sense. Global climate change, the movement of people from Latin America to the U.S., and the colonial transatlantic

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[31] These are only three losses that I think are particularly significant to the narrative. One might also consider Óscar's migration from Cuba to the U.S. as another important loss, as well as that of the Santiago Boy—a boy from the community who fell through the ice in the lake

slave trade all require the use of a creative, imaginative consciousness in order to understand them as natural or normal. Likewise, a critical account orientated towards the transformation of these phenomena requires creative and imaginative work.

Carrillo's *Loosing My Espanish* provides a clear example of the tense intimacy that I am naming a tender struggle. Narrated in the first person voice of Óscar Delossantos, Carrillo's novel generates the sense that the narrator is sharing a secret or is inviting the reader into an intimate conversation. A significant part of this is due to the fact that the novel's narrative is composed as the final lecture that Óscar delivers to the students in his high school world history class. When the reader approaches the novel, therefore, we are engaged as another one of Óscar's students. The effect of this narrative structure is perhaps most pronounced and significant when Óscar frequently commands his students to pay attention to him: "Escuchen señores," he commands (9). "Óiganme." The imperative mood of these phrases exemplifies the ethical demand for recognition and attention that John Beverley describes as the dominant feature of testimonio narrative: "This presence of the voice," Beverley explains, "which we are meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than a fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, a desire to impose

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during a Boy Scout trip and whose story is referenced in the

oneself on an institution of power" (34). This imperative mood of the narrative is important to Beverley's theorization of testimonio as distinct from other narrative forms. Along with testimonio's location within a social historical context that is relatively synonymous with the reader's, the imperative mood generated by the individual narrator obligates the reader to confront her/his complicity in the narrative being read: that is, in the life of the testimonio's speaker. In the case of *Loosing My Espanish* the life-narrative that we are being interpellated into is, on the one hand, history but it is also the particular life-narrative of Óscar Delossantos. Óscar is giving his final world history lecture because he is being fired from his post at an all-male Catholic high school for being gay. Specifically, an administrator has discovered a letter that Óscar had written to his now deceased lover Aureliano Francisco García Carrera and the administrator assumed it was written to a student of his. Here then the complicity between the reader and the narrative-life might be thought of as history generally, but also the particular history of Óscar Delossantos.

At another moment in his final lecture, Óscar instructs us to "Move in close señores. Close, close," as part of an exercise to simulate the experience of African slaves stowed in the hulls of ships and transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas (75). And, yet,

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narrative's first pages.

this move also seems to draw parity between our bodies' physical proximity and the intimacy of his speech. "Close, close, señores, even closer," Óscar commands (81). He wants us (his students) to understand the lesson; not abstractly, but in a more intimate, embodied way. As he mentions in previous moments of his lecture, "we are not talking about something that happened over three hundred years ago in a country that none of us can even go to" (20). As Óscar attempts to make clear: "The fact that we're each here is an act of colonial alchemy" (65). Therefore, we're talking about the Latino students in his classroom whose families hail from different corners of Latin America, about our present condition as the result of an ongoing imperialist regime of power. Again, the narrative we encounter (both that of history and Óscar Delossantos's life) is meant to be understood as one with which we have a particular commitment or engagement. The history of the enslavement of Africans, the story of Óscar, a Cuban American high school teacher fired for being gay, the story of Chicago's mixed Latina/o population—these are all the narratives with which we are implicated.

But these moves of directly addressing us (the readers-students) in the second person or of instructing us to place ourselves in more intimate quarters with each other are only the technical means by which this intimacy and tenderness is achieved. Physical proximity

and direct speech do not in and of themselves achieve this goal; they merely serve to facilitate tenderness. This particular first person narrative voice also shares a lot with us, sometimes making it difficult to follow how or why certain things are related. The narrative becomes like that of a close friend who has recently experienced the traumatic loss of relationships that previously anchored his sense of being, and who is now (in the narrative's present tense) laying it all on us, his listeners, in order to make some sense out of it. In his attempt to create that meaning, the different threads of Óscar's "narrative" cascade one over the other, bleeding from one into the next in such a way that it becomes difficult to keep (or, perhaps, make) straight the relationship between the different elements into linear, causal sequences of events. If we think of narrative as a technology for making sense, this porous kind of storytelling seems somewhat difficult to follow. But, I argue that it can be interpreted as an alternative mode of "making sense." In this narrative, everything is related to everything else. Although it may seem somewhat confusing, what we are doing in *Loosing*, is submitting or subjecting ourselves to that relatedness, to the mode of being where we are in relation with everything and not fighting against it, not trying to escape this relatedness. In this way, the story's composition or narration challenges modern/colonialist paradigms of narrative perspective that

assume an independence from or dominance over what is being related.

Take, for example, the image offered of the condition of Amá's house after the accidental fire she started. "The wooden back porch has been burned away and the sky comes in so now we might as well have been sitting in the garden…The table's aluminum frame is still intact, though the linoleum top has melted into itself a little so that the blue and yellow and gray colors now all converge kaleidoscopically" (5). This description suggests a blurring of boundaries and the inability to keep the kitchen from the garden or the colors on the table from altering the others. And in the garden:

> The delphiniums are so lush, plentiful and purple for this time of year you can't see more than a foot into the yard. The rose thickets have come up so high over the back fence, and the smell of garbage and urine we had all grown used to over the years has been overwhelmed by the fragrance. They encroach so far—as if to make a canopy—there would be no way of telling there was anything else there, if from where we sat you couldn't see the peaks of three or four elephant ears, gigantic, seven or eight feet tall, in the air. (5)

The inability to distinguish between spaces, colors, odors and

objects in this passage serves to mirror both the experience of Amá in her loss of certain faculties of her consciousness, as well as that of Óscar as his life begins to unravel or become loosened from its anchors (work, love, family). Both characters begin to lose/loose those things that anchor them into some consciousness of reality and that allow them to make the necessary distinctions for linear movement through space and time. The opening phrase of the novel—"sometimes you no know you no going to like something until you right in the middle of no liking" (3)—is interpreted by Óscar as a kind of touchstone, repeating it a few times throughout the novel. The phrase brings together many different experiences into a kind of understanding: "although we were staring at smears that trace the carpet along the hall…I knew she was talking about both that moment then as well as when we first came and lost the Santiago Boy; and the moment we set foot in La Habana Pequeña, as well as the first sentence that I hear Amá say in English" (8). The phrase does not promise anything in particular and yet it attempts to provide the function of some kind of map or guide to future experience: sometimes you can't know something until you're in the process of knowing it.

A sense of perspective, that which facilitates a linear motion through space/time is lost or loosened—either by mental disease, as with Amá, or by other factors, as in the case of Óscar—and so certain

distinctions begin to dissipate and melt away, not in a kind of happy postmodern loss of boundaries, but as something rather un-ironic. It is perhaps something more vital or necessary to a re-configuration of time, space and social relations. This is similar to what goes on in the following question that Delossantos asks us, his students:

> How is it that I came to a time when Padre Martínez from Amá's church gives a liberation mass every year in my classroom on the anniversary of El Salvador's La Matanza from a time that I sat there where you are now, thinking some of the very same things that you do, with very little thought of how easy it was to get here unless, instead of a measure of time, history is space, like a series of rooms that we can just as easily step into as out of? (19)

Space, in other words, facilitates these journeys across time. Óscar's classroom *is* history expressed in spatial (as well as demographic) terms. This is one of only two very brief moments in which Óscar expresses a consciousness of his particular method of storytelling. That is, of moving from one historical reference to another against linear, teleological narratives of time. But, this is not some trendy, ironic exercise in history; it is absolutely necessary. This is why he insists that we come closer together. It is (only) a physical performance of what is already true: that "the fact that we're each here

is an act of colonial alchemy" (65). This reflection is tender in its poetic theorization of space and time, its willingness to be poetic, not out of luxury but rather out of necessity; it is an exercise of creative imagination for the sake of survival. Otherwise, how else would one make sense of this "act of colonial alchemy"?

In fact, the importance of creative imagination is another lesson that he teaches his students, comparing the mental work necessary to keep cool in the unseasonably warm April weather with the intellectual labor that is already involved in normalizing so many things that would otherwise be alarming (including global climate change) or for rearranging the relations between different phenomena in particular configurations. "Pretend, my Amá says on a day like today, that you are an ice cube, or maybe just a sliver of ice in a limonada, melting away," Óscar instructs (66). "You've done it when you've walked out of school these past afternoons and the gutters and the eaves are overflowing with dirty water; the streets are wet and littered with tree boughs and leaves, and the garbage you took out the night before is spilled across a lawn a block from your homes" (66). The unfamiliar rains and weather patterns have caused this interruption of boundaries and of distinctions, the mixing of refuse and tree limbs on the streets and yards. These are clear signs of something amiss but only if one is prepared to pay attention. Here Óscar explains such a

move:

> Stepping over huge puddles of rainwater that swelter and steam in this heat, you tell yourselves the world around you isn't changing before your very eyes; that this—this unseasonably warm weather—couldn't have anything to do with what chemical companies do, or what the manufacturers that you may go work for do. No it's not changing, you say, slipping through all the concepts of reality that you've ever been given without even knowing it. (67)

Colonization and global climate change are, therefore, the things that make the exercise of creative imagination a vital and necessary skill for continued survival. It is a practice that allows one to think of history as a measure of space, rather than of time; it allows one to imagine oneself as an ice cube. "How else have [people of color] managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity," Barbara Christian asks, if not for the active theorization found in "narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking" (68). To do otherwise, to accept the normalized narrative of things like colonialism and global climate change by repeating the same stories in

the same form, is to risk believing in its logic: that colonization was a normal stage in human history, detached from particular ideologies and long surpassed; and that unseasonable weather patterns have nothing to do with a changing reality, in great part effected by human actions.

Thus, two important things are happening in *Loosing My Espanish*. On the one hand, the novel demands us to put ourselves in the place of the students and imagine an intimacy with Óscar, much like the testimonio narrative also compels the reader/listener to pay attention to the narrator. Secondly, it demands that we exercise our creative imagination to reconceptualize the world and historical relations in such a way that challenge dominant accounts. In fact, they are not unrelated, nor are they necessarily separate processes. The use of critical imagination to reconceptualize reality is precisely what makes possible the response to Óscar's call to attention.

There are two additional moments in the novel that I think are important to discuss as examples of the different ways of knowing and of making sense that the novel seeks to engage in. In the first, Óscar's provides a description of a memorial service for Joaquín-Ernesto—the Santiago Boy—who is referenced throughout the narrative as the boy who was lost in a Boy Scout outing in which Óscar participated. In describing the service, Óscar provides an account of the Latina/o

neighborhood in Chicago:

> A woman who had only seen his picture in the Spanish newspaper had come from the edge of the city, had called a cousin and told her all about the boy who was exactly her own son's age. Hundreds of veladoras had been lit; thousands of rosarios passed between thumb and forefinger in the name of Joaquín-Ernesto.
>
> People who didn't know him, wouldn't have been able to tell him apart from any of the others the same age or height in the 227, stopped what they were doing in the middle of their day in a collective moment of silence; change from the empty tomatillo cans above sinks was given for flowers. Ay, y señores, their fragrance—white roses, orchids, lilies shipped from warmer places—took the air above the sea of brown people, crested the lace edges of the occasional black mantilla and swelled up thick and hot and steamed the windows of the church and glazed the doors shut against the cold. (70)

The appeals to multiple senses of perception ("Hundreds of veladoras," "thick and hot"); the convocation of community vis-à-vis public discourse ("the Spanish newspaper"), but also through something else rendered here in this passage as kind of mystical force;

the collective idiosyncrasies that bind people together ("empty tomatillo cans above sinks"); the details, details, details ("rosarios passed between thumb and forefinger," "white roses, orchids, lilies," "lace edges"); the image of a community gathered in a collective response to the oppressive winter of a working poor Chicago neighborhood—all of these things compel the reader to experience this neighborhood and the community, to "encounter" it through bodily and affective orders of perception, as well as intellectually. All of these things present a beautiful and tender image of company; they make the reader feel to be sharing in that company. This is a way of knowing space/place and people that is often made unavailable in conventional forms of planning, geography, political economy or statistical literatures. That phrase—"Ay, y señores, the fragrances"—cues us into the way Delossantos remembers the memorial service, a tender memory that he decides to share with us. The references to "the edge of the city" and "warmer places" making us vacillate between the space of the memorial and so many other distant places, revealing in a sense the double-conscious condition of the displaced, the colonized, the diaspora that is always trying to inhabit a borderland of sorts, feeling the multiplicity and dynamicity of a space that is otherwise rendered stable by maps, charts and technical reports. And so with the references to the edges of the city and warmer places we are reminded

of both the limits of the here-now of the memorial service, as well as of its relatedness to these times-places beyond.

With all of the different details of the passage above, with the various appeals to multiple senses of perception, in other words, we are able to *feel* this place, this neighborhood, this community, rather than knowing it through a collection of other sorts of details: dimensions in historical, geographic, or ethnographic terms. We are not told the year, the name of the neighborhood that appears on the map of Chicago, the details of the community's demography. It matters a great deal what particular *kinds* of details the narrative shares with us, in determining what kinds of projects any story will facilitate.

Óscar's account of his deceased lover seems to also be particularly attuned to the differences that result from the details about what is or isn't said. In reflecting on the death of Aureliano Francisco García Carrera, Óscar's narrative challenges what it means to tell a true or real story:

> Aureliano Francisco García Carrera, por ejemplo, was dying the day that I met him. Sick, he told me so when I met him. But then sick is all anyone said back then. Then saying anything else was the same as telling what you were, and waiting for a narrative of what you thought was your life to be rewritten and retold to you: who and what

> he did when he was there would be examined and compared to all the lives around him. The year before we met he had awakened to feel his lungs filling and knew—had read in the paper, had heard it rumored, had had a friend of a friend—what was happening was happening to him, but he still lay there, shivering in the cold morning light knowing that the moment that he went to the phone to call for help his entire life—invisible cities in shapes that he had yet to imagine that had roamed his head for years faded on the ceiling above his bed—was now measurable, real. (257)

I've always felt the need to be very careful about reading this section as the section where Óscar Delossantos reveals to us that his lover Aureliano Francisco García Carrera died of AIDS because the text doesn't say this in explicit terms, and yet leaves it so close to being said, mirroring the desire that Aureliano Francisco García Carrera has to not cast his illness in certain terms. There is a particular political motivation behind not saying it that should be respected. Something about Óscar not wanting to say it in this way because it would somehow take away his partner, reduce him to something that couldn't fully capture or account for his life: it would allow the narrative of his life to be "rewritten and retold" in their terms, not your

own. It is a resistance to letting his partner become reduced to a number, a statistic, a knowable quantity. It's not just a reaction, a negation of something that has already been put forward; it is also a positive project in the sense that it is a positive definition, that it comes from a sense of self-determination. This is how it is related to the example of Aureliano Francisco García Carrera for whom it is very important to be able to tell and write his narrative on his own terms, to disclose his life on his own terms.

I wonder, too, if it would be possible to link this moment with the way that *Loosing* represents Óscar's mother's illness: it is, likewise, never named in a formal fashion, the diagnosis is never fully shared as a particular thing with a proper name, (although, judging by some of the scenes of doctor visits and the symptoms that led her to the doctor, we might try to guess that it is something like dementia). Maybe here, too, there is an attempt to resist any effort to reduce his mother by any identification as someone who suffers from dementia. That naming it in this way would open her up to interpretation by the reader in a way that is already heavily pre-determined. To go back to the example of Aureliano Francisco García Carrera above, there is this need to resist certain terms or to redefine them.

V.

In these reflections what I am after is an argument for honoring

the importance of everyday survival in the face of various regimes of oppression because these ordinary or mundane actions are often underappreciated. I am arguing for a recognition of everyday forms of survival as important instances of struggle that deserve to be taken seriously. The urgency for tenderness with which Carrillo writes his stories, places his work within the definition of poetry that Lorde articulates in her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," as well as Beverley's reflections on testimonio as a revolutionary prose genre. For Lorde, poetry is more than the assemblage of fair-sounding words or some exercise for its own sake: it is the articulation and expression of a struggle and an attempt to theorize that struggle. Tender narratives, like *Loosing My Espanish* are political acts in the sense that they are acts of caring for those of us who "were never meant to survive" according to the various logics of oppression

CHAPTER FIVE

SHIMMERING THROUGH THE HELPLESSNESS: COUNTERSTORYTELLING, TENDERNESS, AND TRANSFORMATION

I.

In 2012, I attended an open mic event sponsored by the Cornell University Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center and the Durland Alternatives Library. Billed as "A Night of Counterstorytelling: Stories of Resistance, Self-love and Community," an e-mail promoting the event announced that "Through poetry, song, stories, and spoken word we want this night to give voice to those that were previously unheard, to celebrate the intersections of ourselves, to find your story in other stories, to find community, and to build our own community" (Pilipovich-Wengler). The event organizers elaborated further on their definition of the evening's aims by making an inaugural statement at the open mic night, declaring that "Counterstorytelling is an act of resistance; they [counterstories] are the stories we **offer** to counter the stories we are **told**, stories that stand in opposition to the narratives of dominance that we are so used to that we can't even hear them being *whispered into our ears everyday*" (John; emphasis in original). Although this statement invokes the issue of oppositional politics and shares a great deal with the definition of counter-storytelling theorized by Richard Delgado in

his essay “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” the rest of their statement from that evening also attempts to create a definition of counterstorytelling that moves away from a politics of oppositionality. According to the organizers’ statement, counterstorytelling differs from other types of resistance in that “There is no yelling back at that offensive comment that was just said, no fighting to have your voice heard, no need to fact-check, no premeditated come-backs” (John). Thus, it seems that what interests the organizers the most about counterstorytelling as a practice of resistance is not its oppositionality, but the opportunity it provides to voice different and multiple narrative accounts of reality that don’t necessarily attempt to instantiate their own dominance over, or oppositionality against, others. In this way, we might think of “yelling back at that offensive comment that was just said” as a form of resistance that is preoccupied with proposing an alternative dominance rather than an alternative *to* dominance.

These observations about the organizers’ definitions of the event’s aims and goals, including their theorization of counterstorytelling, are important for thinking about strategies against various modes of oppression and some close reflection on the event’s participation can help to reveal some of this. The majority of the participants and guests at the counterstorytelling event were women,

including many women of color. Many participants read poems or spoken-word pieces that they had previously prepared, while others shared prose. Some were rehearsed and memorized, while still others were recited from a printed sheet or book. There was a young white man, however, who stood out from the rest of the evening's speakers. Upon taking the stage, he began to share an impromptu series of reflections about his frustration over the racism inherent to policing practices in the United States, making a marginal reference to the recent coverage by the local press of a white, male officer's shooting by a young black man during a pursuit. By comparison with the majority of the open mic's speakers, his speech was considerably longer and arguably lacked significant preparation. He shared how upsetting it was to him that young black men are frequently targeted by the police and immediately vilified by news media accounts, while his privilege as a white, suburban middle-class hetero man allows him to evade many of these same problems. More than this, however, he expressed his frustration at not knowing what to do about it. How could he, a privileged white, hetero, Ivy League-educated, middle-class man, address the injustices he sees? For, he seemed to suggest, in the matrix of intersecting ideologies of gender, sexual orientation, race, class and geography, this man had found himself in the particular position where all forms of privilege accumulate and converge. Thus,

according to this narrative, his location within this social position of ultimate privilege is precisely what traps him and leaves him feeling powerless and frustrated against those very forces that constitute him as a privileged subject.

Considering the event organizers' introduction and discussion of counterstorytelling, I find myself asking: to what extent does this particular "sharing" align with the stated goals and objectives of the event? What is the counterstory of this sharing? How (or, indeed, does) it function as an act of resistance meant to also be generative of different, multiple realities and collectivities? Although it is articulated as a frustration *with* privilege, I argue that this performance serves to reify that very privilege, construed here as a condition of being unable to claim a minority or non-dominant status. Observing the use of similar strategies of self-reflection by anti-racist activist workshops meant to address various forms of privilege, Andrea Smith argues that such practices reaffirm the very privileges they are meant to challenge when they are taken out of the context of collectivized action and are, instead, practiced as the means for individualized transformation (264). For Smith, such exercises are borne out of a settler colonialist paradoxical imperative of the self-determining subject that seeks to both constitute itself in relation to others, while also transcending its own interpersonal affectability (270-2). Much of these same dynamics

are witnessed in the open mic "speech" referenced above. The narrative that this participant has created associates a permanence and stability (if not naturalness) with certain forms of privilege that results in generating the very barriers to challenging such inequality. That is, he is paralyzed as a social actor, precisely because his privileges are so stable and permanent.

The question that this man asks is one that I've heard many times in different variations. Essentially, the question comes from a position or assumption that, for instance, men are the problem of feminism or that white people are the problem of racism and therefore they cannot be the solution. From this standpoint a sense of shame or guilt is attached to inhabiting or being identified with these privileged sites. This is a very simplistic understanding of what oppression is. It simplifies racism, for example, as an encounter between a white actor and a non-white object of the racist action, or of sexism as something perpetrated by men against women. What this perspective fails to account for in other words is the different ways in which these forms of oppression manifest themselves. Whiteness, for instance, is an ideology of superiority that can be taken up at times by many different kinds of people for various levels of benefit. This means that non-white subjects can participate in the belief of whiteness and its reproduction without receiving the same benefits that would accrue to them as

white people. That is, they can still identify with a belief in the superiority of whiteness, even as this simultaneously means a recognition of their own inferiority. Here, the work of critical race studies like that of legal scholar Cheryl Harris, sociologist George Lipsitz, and historian David Roediger has provided key insights into the functioning of whiteness or white privilege as a form of property, an investment and a material benefit to be exchanged.[32] In other words, what the work of many scholars of race and of whiteness in particular have noted is that in order for whiteness to "pay out," as it were, it requires an elaborate system of ideological belief. The same can be true for other privileged categories of difference, including gender, class, sexuality, nationality, etc. Therefore, for someone to bemoan their identification or positioning within these sites of privilege is in part a refusal to challenge such systems of belief because of the material benefits afforded to identifying or being identified with these positions.

I don't mean to suggest that these systems of oppression are as easy to dismantle as refusing to believe in something. To be sure, there is a material reality to speak of here: whiteness, for instance, is not

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[32] See, for instance: Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*. 106.8 (1993): 1707-91; Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998; Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness*. London/New York: Verso, 1991.

just a theoretical concept but is experienced, for instance, in terms as diverse as one's housing options, the range of available emotions, and the amount of material wealth and economic privilege one can accrue. However, what I think is important to focus on in spaces like the open mic that I'm writing about is the discursive side of these privileges, in other words, the work of maintenance that discourse performs on behalf of privilege. Bemoaning one's privilege in front of an audience of folks who are on the other side of that surely does nothing but reinforce and reproduce it. It is a refusal to give up or reject the good feelings that result from such privilege; or, in this case, it becomes the privilege to feel frustrated in such an open way.

By refusing to challenge his own identification with privilege, by refusing to acknowledge any of his own vulnerabilities or liminality, this white, middle-class, elite college-educated hetero man holds on to those same privileges for himself. Though he acknowledges the asymmetry in relations of power and privilege, it is only on a descriptive level rather than a critical or deconstructive one: his narrative focuses on the surface but doesn't explore the ongoing processes responsible for this state of affairs. He avoids the opportunity that the counter-storytelling event presents for him to disavow, reject or openly struggle with his identification with privilege; or to acknowledge his own liminality or vulnerability and, in this way,

to participate in the transformation of existing relations of power. Instead of critically acknowledging vulnerability and liminality, and recognizing their radical potential, this speaker reaffirms his belief in the privileges that he has (supposedly) passively accumulated; not realizing (or perhaps refusing to realize) how his bemoaning of his ultimately privileged position is actually a way of participating in the re-production of that same privilege. As scholars of race, gender, sexuality and class have made clear, one dominant feature of privilege is not having to acknowledge its existence or not having to acknowledge one's own investment in it. In the narrative shared by the young white speaker his privileges are natural conditions, rather than the consequences of ongoing conflict and contestation. According to this narrative, the (absolute) privileges of whiteness or heterosexuality are not products of historical struggles for hegemony, but are instead interpreted as relations that are simply always true. In his voiced frustrations about his irrefutable privilege he underscores how different he is from the rest of us present at the event: queer, of color, women.

This is a failed opportunity to perform the kind of counterstorytelling that the event's organizers meant to encourage: a counterstorytelling that is simultaneously an act of resistance and of

occupying liminality.[33] This form of counter-storytelling, I contend, is an activity in which people move into the limen for the purpose of realizing radical transformations of social relations. Participating in the process of counter-storytelling is a way of sharing or acknowledging one's struggles and this is what gives the act radical potential. It challenges linear narratives of social change that would otherwise highlight the transcendence of social conditions by focusing instead on the often continuous work of realizing such transformations.

II.

I find a similar kind of counterstorytelling—as a means of revealing, acknowledging and sharing one's own liminality for the purpose of creating new realities and forming new communities—in

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[33] With this anecdote what I am trying to do is to put some pressure on this notion of privilege and inequality as things that simply affect us from without, things that impose themselves upon us and condition our existence without our participation in the process of ideological struggle. Indeed, for some, whiteness has become "stuck" with racist and classist ideologies, but this has not been possible without significant (historical and ongoing) efforts to narrate whiteness this way. Racial and economic privilege are dominant accounts of whiteness, to be sure, but they are not the only versions of this story in circulation. Therefore, the objective of counter-storytelling is not to replace one version (of whiteness, masculinity, citizenship, heterosexuality, etc.) with another, more accurate (read dominant/hegemonic) account; but rather to engage with and participate in the ongoing struggle to define sex, gender, race, citizenship, etc. Counter-storytelling is a struggle against domination and subordination A refusal to participate in the act of counter-

Manuel Muñoz's fiction. His stories participate in cultivating an openness about people's everyday struggles to connect with each other and to deal with their relation to California's Central Valley. I argue that there is a transformational power in Muñoz's work, a tender approach that, rather than foreclosing the potential of wounds and sites of struggle, seeks to maintain them open as sites of transformation (Anzaldúa; Lorde). In the remainder of this chapter, I will relate some observations from my reading of Manuel Muñoz's short story collection *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* (2007) with the work of philosophers María Lugones (2006) and Erinn Gilson (2014). I want to connect "tender struggle" with María Lugones's concept of "complex communication" as a mode of resistance between various intercultural subjects against oppressive monological impulses, exploring how struggles with and for an openness to being affected by others, are related to and helpful for creating cross-cultural coalitions against oppression. In order to do so, I turn to the work of Erinn Gilson on vulnerability as a potential ethical resource. Picking up on and exploring the limits of Judith Butler's theorizations of vulnerability and precariousness as ethico-political values, Gilson argues that the ethical value of vulnerability can only be realized when one identifies moments in which vulnerability is tied not only to harm

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storytelling—particularly in a counter-storytelling event—is a refusal to

but also to affection, creativity, and resilience (67). In this chapter, then, I propose to think through these questions by turning to the representations of unfulfilled longings for collectivity and connection in the fiction of Manuel Muñoz, which are often interrupted by performances of strength, security and detachment; and, while it is the avowal of vulnerability that assures greater relationality, it is a precarious strategy. Thus, Muñoz's fiction provides a useful addition to ongoing discussions on ethico-political idealism, vulnerability and the critical role of fiction.

III.

Erinn Gilson's *The Ethics of Vulnerability* examines how philosophers have been thinking about vulnerability and its relation to ethics, in order to evaluate its potential as an ethical resource. That is, can vulnerability function as a source for ethics? Gilson's main argument is that vulnerability *can* be at the center of an ethics if and only when vulnerability is re-thought in terms that are different from currently dominant conceptualizations of vulnerability as synonymous with injurability. According to Gilson, although there have already been some attempts to theorize ethics and responsibility to others based on vulnerability (including the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Goodin and Judith Butler), these have not been successful

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struggle against these and other forms of injustice.

because they continue to frame vulnerability as something to avoid in oneself or as a condition from which one would be grateful to be spared. In general, she argues that even in the theoretical accounts of vulnerability that Butler has recently developed, there is an overdetermined relationship between vulnerability and harm or violence.

Gilson, therefore, argues in favor of a reconceptualization of vulnerability as more than an openness or susceptibility to harm. She pushes for a theorization of vulnerability as a more ambiguous and ambivalent openness to being affected by others. Vulnerability, per Gilson, is an undetermined and unqualified potentiality; neither positive nor negative. She does not deny that vulnerability may manifest itself as the potential for harm caused by others. But she challenges the reduction of vulnerability's full potentiality to only its negative consequences. This dominant understanding of vulnerability will not sustain an ethics of vulnerability. For, if vulnerability is thought of only as a weakness or susceptibility to injury—in other words, a condition that one would be fortunate to avoid—then this significantly diminishes its ethical value. Rather than a value to be cultivated in oneself as well as in others, vulnerability becomes something that should be avoided, moderated or reduced. Thus, this reduced understanding of vulnerability's potentiality creates a paradox

that makes it impossible to center an ethical practice around it.

However, Gilson's attention to the ways in which vulnerability is conceptualized also takes into account the social, political, and historical forces that inform this concept's definitions, and valorizations. That is, she reminds us that the perception and definition of that which is ethical/responsible or that which is vulnerable is always a mediated result: "where and whether we see it, whose vulnerability we perceive and respond to, how we regard the differing vulnerabilities of different parties, and so on are all socially mediated" (31). Thus, vulnerability is not fundamentally reducible to injurability, nor is it always something perceived or defined as necessitating avoidance and minimization. Rather, it is within a particular context that this affectability is understood as weakness, incapacity, or an otherwise avoidable condition. For instance, the over-identification of vulnerability with people, social positions, or qualities that are deemed inferior within a particular socio-political or historical context is part of what maintains its reductively negative value and definition (7): children, the elderly, women, etc. Where these subjectivities, statuses, or traits are deemed inferior, their association with vulnerability generates a normative imperative to eschew or minimize one's perceived condition of vulnerability. Therefore, a significant part of the project that Gilson calls for is to draw a new

map, as it were, that would "recognize vulnerability in more unlikely places, to find other sites where vulnerability is linked not only to violence but to affection, creativity, resilience" (67). This would significantly alter the meaning of such a susceptibility to others by addressing more directly the mediating factors responsible for vulnerability's limited ethical value.

IV.

Gilson's theorizations of the cultural politics of ethical values and the potentials for reading vulnerability against the grain of a masculinist and neoliberal conceptualization of vulnerability works well with María Lugones's writing about anti-oppression organizing centered in liminal coalitional sites. Although Gilson emphasizes the need for a critical reappraisal of vulnerability, I think Lugones's call for a rethinking of liminality is similarly oriented. Both of these contribute to my theorization of tenderness as struggle.

María Lugones's essay "On Complex Communication" is a theorization about the limits and possibilities for building cross-cultural coalitions against oppression. The main concern for Lugones is the relatively narrow understandings of oppression and resistance that she sees as a result of much identity based anti-oppression organizing. Although she acknowledges that there has been some theoretical explorations of the possibilities of "deep coalitions" (i.e.

those that cut across boundaries of affiliative senses of belonging), Lugones's concern is that most of this thinking is built upon the presupposition that "if we only could meet each other in a liminal space outside the hardenings and crystallizations of structure, a space marked by transgression, a standing outside the bourgeois public, away from power in its dominating face, then we would be semiotically transparent to each other" (76). As radical and queer feminists of color have proven over the last several decades, assumptions such as this one are deeply problematic for efforts to organize against oppression. There is no such objectively or stable anti-oppressive space or counter-hegemonic site. Imagining and privileging a liminal space where all differences are reduced to a lowest common denominator as a site for radical action is a problematic assumption. It denies the observation that even within such marginal spaces as the Chicano movement, feminism, and struggles for food justice, one must still attend to the ways in which people are constituted by and through various modes and categories of difference. Neither gender, race/ethnicity, class, nor something like food, constitute a sufficient terrain of commonality.[34] As Lugones points out, there is no liminal space that is empty of all

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[34] Of course, as Cristina Beltrán notes, following much influence from poststructuralist and feminist of color thought, this lack of commonality or unity is not necessarily a/the problem for securing the desired outcomes of social justice movements like those sought by Latina/o activists.

power relations and/or free of domination's barriers to intelligibility (76). In fact, as Caribbean poet and thinker Édouard Glissant might suggest, such an assumption of mutual intelligibility and transparency might itself be a tool for a colonialist mode of "communication," in that it dangerously seeks to reduce diversity of modes of being for the sake of intelligibility.[35] In other words, Lugones seeks a different kind of communication that is not predicated on the reduction of differences or semiotic transparency. Only this kind of complex communication can generate the necessary conditions for a deep coalition against oppression.

If it is possible to stand against all oppression, Lugones argues, "we cannot presuppose the journey across liminal sites that constitutes the liminal *coalitional* space" (77; emphasis in original). "A coalitional limen, or borderlands, is one that is achieved, and the achievement is both intercommunal and communicative" (77-8). In other words, a liminal coalition space that centers a stand against all oppression cannot be presupposed to exist but is produced through travel or through intercommunal communicative practices. In order to participate in this process of complex communication, the oppressed must begin by recognizing that there are others who occupy different liminal spaces and who, as differently oppressed subjects,

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[35] See, for instance, "For Opacity." Poetics of Relation. Tr. Betsy Wing.

communicate in a way that is inconsistent with dominant structures. What Lugones means by "forms of communication that are inconsistent with dominant structures" is that colonized or oppressed subjects must be intercultural speakers in the sense that they must learn to inhabit and travel between their own reality and that which the oppressor has instituted as the dominant mode of reality. Thus, in order for intercultural subjects to speak to one another without being discovered by the oppressor or in order to talk about the colonizer without being discovered, they must use the oppressor's own "language" as it were or their own logic in new and innovative was. Furthermore, this difference in communication is sometimes expressed in form rather than content so that one may deliver a message whose content is consistent with the master's narrative but whose method of delivery undercuts and transforms the message's meaning. Thus, Lugones goes on to claim that, even if we are not necessarily semiotically transparent to each other, "if we recognize each other as occupying liminal sites, then we will have a disposition to read each other away from structural, dominant meaning, or have good reason to do so as oppressed peoples. What we need then is both to be able to recognize liminality and to go from recognition to a deciphering of resistant codes" (79). That is, because oppressed peoples are already

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Ann Arbor: UM Press, 1997. 189-94.

familiar with the multiplicity of reality—in the sense that they practice a double- or border-consciousness—Lugones contends that they can be capable of understanding otherwise subversive languages or modes of being even if not immediately. This complex communication, rather than simply opposing or resisting the dominant monologism of the oppressor by creating a singular counter-discourse, seeks to recognize and promote *many*, multiple logics that will collectively subvert the colonizer's monologism. It bears repeating that what Lugones is calling for in terms of a "deep coalition" built through complex communication is a politics of anti-oppression that is attuned to multiple forms of oppression. In this coalitional form of conversation, "we communicate to other intercultural resistors something that says, 'We live among colonizers, let's disrupt the monologism by extending the intercultural polyglossia toward a far more subversive conversation.' Here, it is the form of the speech, its polyglossia, that communicates with other intercultural polyglots, and it may be both meant and heard as an invitation to open up, to complicate, the polyglossia" (83).

I tend to agree with Lugones's theorization of complex communication and her argument about its importance for forging deep coalitions. Furthermore, I read Lugones's call for a liminal coalitional space as a call for inhabiting and recognizing multiple forms of vulnerability. In other words, I am suggesting a connection

between Lugones's theorization of liminality and Gilson's reconceptualization of vulnerability. If liminality describes a state of being-in-between or outside of dominant structures of power, I think the comparison with vulnerability is fair insofar as occupying such a position leaves one open to the effects of others. If being vulnerable as a kind of ethical stance means acknowledging one's connection to others (and *hence* one's openness to their effects on one's self) then I think this requires a recognition of one's liminality or distance from structures of power. This recognition necessarily diminishes one's claim to power. This is the only way to resist the monologism of oppression. Vulnerability as an ethical stance is another way of acknowledging the multiplicity of reality, an act that Lugones sees as critical for anti-oppression organizing, for building deep liminal coalitions against oppression's monologic account of reality. To be vulnerable, I'd like to suggest, is to offer a counterstory to oppressive narratives of invulnerability and independence.

V.

Manuel Muñoz's stories mostly center their attention on the lives of working class Mexicans and Mexican Americans in California's Central Valley. *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* is a collection of short stories that expresses a longing for community and connection. On a structural level, it is interesting to note that, although the book

consists of a series of ten independent short stories, as one reads through them one realizes that not only do they all take place more or less around the same small neighborhood around Gold Street in a small town in the Valley, but that the lives that each story treats actually intersect with one another in different ways. So, although you might read one story in which the narrator does not identify themselves formally, you might learn their name as their life is referenced in a different story. And, yet, these intersections do not always necessarily lead to meaningful collectivities or connections. These failures at connections or collectivities and the loss it implies are what tie the stories together into a cohesive unit and what I'd like to explore.

In the opening story, "Lindo y Querido," the reader is introduced to Connie, a mother who is mourning the death of her teenage son Isidro as the result of a motorcycle accident that also took the life of her son's lover Carlos. That her son was in an amorous relationship with another man and that she was unaware or unable to accept this before his death makes Connie feel a double sense of loss: the loss of her son also means the loss of an opportunity to know him. Even though she is not the only mother to lose a son in the accident, she struggles to accept the opportunity to use her grief and mourning as a site of identification. At Carlos's funeral, the narrator tells us, "Connie

will be unable to say anything to the other mother…and that very night she will wonder if she should make a gesture of friendship to her" (22). The story ends without Connie being able to bridge this gap between herself and the other mother, and so they continue to experience their grief independently of one another. In fact, rather than feeling a sense of accompaniment or community in the shared nature of her grief, it will nag Connie "that there is another mother in town just like her" (23).

In "Tell Him About Brother John" an unnamed narrator makes a begrudging return home to visit his father and siblings in the Valley from living "Over There" in the big city. When his neighbor Brother John shares a painful story about falling in love with another man in Oklahoma who suddenly left him, forcing Brother John to return to the Valley, the narrator abruptly stops him before Brother John can finish his story. The narrator has his own story of love and loss, but he refuses to share it with Brother John. "I learned a long time ago to keep things simple," the narrator explains (119). "Don't tell much. Don't tell everything. Don't reveal what people don't need or want to know." (119). "No one needs to know the whole story," he imagines himself explaining to Brother John. And, so, by rejecting the invitation to share in Brother John's sense of vulnerability to others, the encounter between the two remains a simple matter of routine or

protocol: another in a series of forced return trips to the Valley. It is precisely that refusal or avoidance of telling the whole story that seems to keep people in the same positions with respect to each other over time. It is these refusals to tell too much that account for the monotony and repetitiveness of the visits that the narrator complains about.

VI.

"Bring Brang Brung" tells the story of another reluctant return home to the Valley and of a reckoning with one's vulnerability to space and place. With the unexpected passing of his partner Adrian, Martín is forced to raise their young son Adán alone and without Adrian's support. In particular, Martín worries about the loss of Adrian's significant financial support, since he was the main provider in their family. For Martín, "The Valley was a mess of lack, of descending into dust, of utter failure" (28). Thus, he experiences his return as a failure of his attempt to escape the Valley. Forced to return, Martín now finds himself facing odds similar to those of the women he had long pitied, like his sister Perla, for having children while in high school and for being left behind in the Valley by the men who fathered their children. Now, he has been left without a domestic partner to figure out a way to raise their child alone in the Valley. "What plagued him most," however, "was the repetition, the continuation of a cycle he had

thought he would never be a part of" (31). Thus, Martín mourns not only the death of his partner Adrian, but also the loss of a sense of control and self-determination. He is frustrated by the realization that there are other forces at work in determining his life outcomes, including the loss of his partner and his inclusion in a cycle of trap economics.

In one scene, however, the omniscient narrator describes a new appreciation that Martín has developed for his sister Perla as she shares some of the difficulties she's experienced in trying to ensure her everyday survival despite her entrapment within the Valley's repetitive cycle of failure and lack. It is the first time that Martín has ventured to inquire about his sister's life since he left the Valley. In fact, it is the first time he has asked about how she supports herself financially and about her experiences raising her son Matthew. Perla explains the precariousness of her work cleaning houses and her frustrations with trying to raise her son Matthew at an age where he seems to reject any of her attempts to reach him. And yet, despite the pain of the details that Perla shares with him, it is Martín, not her, who evidences a sense of shame:

> When she began crying, as he expected her to, Martín sat quietly and watched his younger sister's resolve shimmer through the helplessness. One hand was still on the beer

> can, and because he looked closely now, because he paid attention, he saw that she wore no nail polish, and the two rings on her fingers were simple, unadorned silver. Rings she must have picked out for herself, shopping alone at one of the malls in Visalia, studying the velvet display boxes intently, not bothering to worry over the price, thinking of herself for once. But it wasn't selfishness—Martín understood that. It wasn't like the way he thought of himself, of deserving and wanting, the self-satisfaction and the near greed of having, after years of not-having. Instead, it was a contentment and a self-knowledge, a forgiveness for her own part in her unhappiness, a releasing. (39-40)

Martín's attention to these subtle details about Perla's physical appearance and demeanor reveals a new understanding of his sister and, simultaneously, of himself. What I witness as I read the passage is a transformation in the dynamic between Martín and his sister Perla. Before, Martín's refusal to recognize Perla was significantly tied to his inability to forgive himself. He refused to see her for fear of feeling shame towards her and the other women like her that had remained (imprisoned by a cycle of poverty) in the Valley. Martín avoided his sister, imagining, in a somewhat paranoid fashion, that

Perla would call him out as arrogant, hypocritical, insensitive, unforgiving, judgmental, etc. (29). But, in the passage cited above, Martín finally pays attention to and takes the time to appreciate his sister in a new light. He notices how unashamed and unembarrassed she is; how, in fact, "she shimmer[s] through the helplessness" that he believes is a mark of weakness or shame. In this tender moment of the narrative, Martín also hopes to release himself from the anxiety of loss and failure by acknowledging his own vulnerability rather than seeking to escape or deny it. In this new encounter with his sister that recognition of shared experience with Perla, his mother and other people of the Valley, has transformed from one of pity or shame to respect and admiration.

That Martín associates failure and vulnerability so strongly with femininity makes this recognition of his own femininity different from typical discussions of the effeminacy of gay subjectivity. Rather than a measure of performed behaviors or stylized mannerisms Martín's effeminacy is determined by his subordinated position within a matrix of hierarchical social structures. To the degree that femininity is, for Martín, associated with failure and vulnerability, the recognition of his own sense of helplessness is simultaneously an identification with femininity. Yet, here, that femininity has become more than the occupation of a subordinated position; it is also the strength and

ability to shimmer through the helplessness in a way that Martín could not have previously done. Vulnerability becomes more clearly defined as a susceptibility to being impressed upon by others or other forces and the inability to exert complete control or power over one's self.

I argue that this scene—in which Martín gains a reappreciation for his sister Perla and for his own sense of vulnerability—represents a moment of the struggle for and with tenderness. When thought of as a synonym for vulnerability or a degree of being subject to the effects of others—as is the case with Perla and the other women that Martín grew up with—Martín struggles with his own tenderness; he hesitates to identify this relation within himself because of what it implies about his relative power to determine his own conditions. To identify with Perla or others is to recognize that he is not outside of the never-ending cycle of poverty that plagues the Valley. At the same time, his is a struggle for the feeling of being connected (positively) to his sister and to his hometown. That is, Martín also has a desire to be in relation with Perla and the Valley, which implies that he must be open to being affected by them. This passage is a demonstration of Martín's tenderness in that it shows how Martín is impressed and altered by Perla, despite how much he may wish that he was independent from these effects.

VIII.

Although the title suggests otherwise, "The Comeuppance of Lupe Rivera" tells the story of its own narrator Sergio, a young man who has grown up admiring his fellow neighbor Lupe Rivera. In fact, the majority of the story is composed of Sergio's admiring descriptions of Lupe Rivera addressed to some undisclosed listener(s). Yet, it is precisely this narrative structure that allows us as readers to simultaneously get to know Sergio, even as he is offering a detailed observation of Lupe Rivera. As Sergio recounts the kinds of attention and privilege that Lupe Rivera enjoys, we learn with him about his own inability to find a sense of inclusion as a gay man in the small, insular neighborhood of Gold Street, a place where everyone more or less knows everyone and their personal business. Through this, the story provides a telling account of the ways in which vulnerability is unevenly distributed. In reading Sergio's story, we witness the ways in which the recognition of vulnerability in others is mediated by gender and sexuality (among other regulating norms), thus limiting who can or cannot inhabit this position.

Sergio begins the story by sharing how he has always been entranced by Lupe, ever since he was a young boy. Describing his memories of her from when he was younger, Sergio recounts accompanying Lupe, along with his cousin Celia, to the men's softball

games at the local ballpark:

> On the field, the guys idled around in their uniforms, some of them tipping their chins and waving to Lupe. I don't know about my cousin Celia, but I never knew what I wanted to watch more—the guys who waved over to Lupe or Lupe's fingers on the pencil once the game started, her hand making *X*s and check marks and tabulations that said everything about how fortunate she was, how lucky she was to be so beautiful as well as intelligent. I would watch her make the *X*s one after another, and sometimes I would forget about the guys who would wave to her, their tight arms gripping the bat, like they were hitting just for her. I would look at the *X*s and get a little dreamy, thinking about how smart and beautiful she was, how I could be like her someday if I kept studying. (184-5)

This passage is revealing for several reasons. Most importantly, Sergio's memory of Lupe demonstrates the level of admiration he felt for her. In fact, he admires her so much that he daydreams about being *like* Lupe, "so beautiful as well as intelligent." But it is not only her looks and intelligence that he appreciates. "I never knew what I wanted to watch more," he remembers, "the guys who waved over to Lupe or Lupe's fingers on the pencil." In other words, Sergio also takes

particular notice of the way that other people notice Lupe, the way in which she can hold court, as it were, sitting in the ballpark's bleachers. Lupe is not only the center of Sergio's attention, but she also occupies a similar position for the men at the ballpark and this, in turn, also capture's Sergio's attention. Thus, Sergio's sense of admiration is complex; it is an appreciation of Lupe's personality as much as it is an appreciation for the way she is perceived (in a very general sense) by the community, suggesting that these two things are intimately related.

As much as Sergio dreams of becoming like Lupe, she and others make him aware that his gender and sexuality prevent him from achieving this dream. Sergio recalls how "one evening when the guys on the field waved as usual and I didn't tip my chin at them like I was supposed to" he decided to wave right back, just as Lupe might have done (185). However, because Sergio wasn't supposed to wave back and should have tipped his chin instead, "Lupe looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Stop acting like a girl.' Her stare narrowed into me like light through a keyhole. After that, she wouldn't let me hold her hand" (185). This is a very significant event for Sergio's life given that he had regarded Lupe as a potential role model for his own life. She was someone who looked after him and treated him with small gifts as well as with her individualized attention. To be dismissed

by someone like this hurts Sergio a great deal even though it does not ultimately eliminate the admiration he has for her. Though Sergio had been simply attempting to perform the same gestures as his idol, Lupe's chastising remark makes it clear that hetero-patriarchal gender norms keep him from being like his idol. However, to say that Sergio's gender and sexuality prevent him from achieving this form of identification with Lupe is somewhat more complex than it may seem upon first glance. It is not that Sergio identifies with Lupe as a woman per se, but rather that he wishes to identify with Lupe as someone who can sustain the attention of others, especially the men, as well as with the way she seems (to Sergio) to be both beautiful and intelligent. Thus, when Lupe chastises his apparently transgressive gender performance and subsequently stops treating him with the same kind of affection as before, it forecloses the possibility that he would be able to one day enjoy the kinds of privileges that Lupe does. And it becomes clear to Sergio later that these privileges have a lot to do with her gender and sexual orientation.

The unavailability of this experience is made most evident to Sergio later on in his life, on the occasion of Lupe Rivera's apparent comeuppance. When Lupe's lover Guillermo is murdered in Lupe's own yard, Sergio notices the community's perception and response to the attack and compares it to the lack of such a sensitivity and

reaction to violence directed towards him. Guillermo's murder is an act of revenge taken by his brother-in-law and apparently motivated by the fact that Guillermo left his wife for Lupe. Whether or not Sergio agrees that Lupe deserved to have such violence visited upon her home is unclear. For Sergio, the most interesting observation to be made about the event is not that Lupe got what was coming to her; his interest is in the display of the neighborhood's acute sense of self-awareness and how this perceptive quality allowed the community members to respond almost instantaneously to the attack. The confrontation and the attack are very brief, due in large part to the neighborhood's rapid response. Even before the stranger steps out of his vehicle and confronts Guillermo, Sergio describes how: "we [the neighborhood] all knew there was something wrong when that car came up the street. We knew it didn't belong here and we knew that it was looking for Lupe's house because the driver paused on Gold Street and turned gingerly over to Sierra Way" (187). "We knew that the squeak of unfamiliar brakes meant the men of the neighborhood had to prepare to intervene" (187). In other words, the neighborhood did not have to wait to hear a confrontation or any violence commotion before it knew it was time to intervene. No words, only the ginger approach of an unfamiliar car and its brakes are enough to alert the neighborhood. Thus, Sergio's interest is in the neighborhood's intimate

familiarity with its residents, its awareness of Lupe's idiosyncratic approach to her own home and of the sounds that every other person's car makes. Through a recognition of these almost imperceptible signs, the men of the neighborhood are able to anticipate, without knowing exactly what, that something is about to happen. The neighborhood's insularity, its heterosexism and tenderness all seem to coalesce in this scene. That the neighbors could recognize the "squeak of unfamiliar brakes" or notice that the car's driver was an outsider by their "ginger" approach to Lupe's house all speaks to the degree of receptivity and perhaps the interconnectedness of the neighborhood. Commenting on the impressiveness of the community's quick response, Sergio shares: "I still don't know how the men in my neighborhood sensed it all coming, how they had ever gained that power of knowledge, that readiness to step up to the inevitable" (188).

One might read this scene as a testament to the interconnectedness of the Gold Street neighborhood. In fact, Sergio lists several instances in which members of the community felt the need to show up and respond to other similar emergencies or instances of violence: domestic arguments, house fires, fistfights, domestic assaults, threats of gun violence, etc. (187). It is clear from Sergio's narration that these events are critical to the establishment of the neighborhood community. It is through these moments of crisis

that the community articulates a sense or awareness of itself (as a group of people looking out for one another)and, thus, defines its boundaries. However, in sharing this story about the neighborhood's extra-sensory mode of self-awareness, Sergio reveals a critical lesson about his own position within this regime of interconnectedness. Sergio remembers this event not only as the night of Lupe's apparent comeuppance but also as the event that marked his own absence from the neighborhood community. If the neighborhood men had been able to sense the attack before it happened, the same ability was not demonstrated when Sergio's own jilted boyfriends came around pounding on his Tio Nico's door to look for him (186). Remembering the night of Lupe's comeuppance and comparing it to his own experiences, Sergio shares: "I realized suddenly that, during the times my ex-boyfriends had driven up to Tio Nico's house with their unfamiliar cars and their loud banging and their threats, the street had been empty. No one had come to see about the car still shuddering outside of Tio Nico's house" (191-2). In other words, even with all the noise and commotion of Sergio's own experiences with intimate violence, no one had come to protect Sergio or to make sure that he was alright as they had done so instinctively with Lupe and other neighbors. The seemingly innate response to violence within the community, in other words, reveals itself to be mediated through

privileges of gender and sexuality. What Sergio realizes are the limits of the neighborhood's sense of itself. While violence against Lupe and so many other community members is felt, the same is not true of Sergio's own experiences with violence. Thus, Sergio's desires to be like Lupe, to be noticed and attended to is an observation of the neighborhood's hetero-patriarchal privileging of Lupe's "straight" femininity. In this context, Sergio's obscurity within the neighborhood obscures his vulnerability and by extension, functions to erase it in the sense that the violence Sergio experiences is not recognized as violence but as something "normal."

VIII.

In the first of the cases examined here, concerning the counterstorytelling open mic event, there was no embrace or avowal of either vulnerability or liminality. Quite the opposite happens. I think the participant was attempting to make a claim for his privileged statuses, or the accumulation of these, as his vulnerability or liminality. There seemed to be a confusion between segregation and liminality, which in fact is quite commonly heard when different forms of privilege are confronted by organizing from the margins: in their response to being "left out" by creating new meanings and understandings of boundaries. Examples include the by now predictable article in the student newspaper about the "segregationist"

units of university program houses like Black, Asian, Native or Latina/o living centers; or, the questions of why there is the need for curricula or scholarship centered from gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc. This questioning of identity-based resources hinges on the unacknowledged politics of knowledge that determine who can know or produce knowledge, when and where. In all of these examples, the segregation based on gender, race or sexuality for the purpose of securing privileges and power is re-interpreted as liminality or vulnerability. But liminality does not imply a separation divorced of context; it is a marginality or segregation from centers or nodes of power and privilege. Vulnerability, on the other hand, might be possible if there wasn't so much emphasis on the notion of exceptionality in terms of privilege accumulation. This emphasis, again, mis-uses liminality to figure as a closing off from other sites or subjects. But, as Lugones has pointed out, the liminal and intercultural subject is already aware of the cracks and apertures within the dominant system and therefore can imagine or train herself to listen for other potential openings within the structures of oppression. This is why I read this act as a failure to perform the specific kind of counter-storytelling that I'm theorizing with the help of the open mic's organizers. As we have seen in the examples from Manuel Munoz's *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue*, this form of counter-

storytelling is not easy. In learning to be vulnerable or tender, one must learn to release oneself from the monologism of the oppressor and to (re)imagine new modes of being, to rehearse potentially new social roles, and to witness and experience the multiplicity of reality.

CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION: EPISTEMIC VULNERABILITY, TENDERNESS AND REVITALIZATION DISCOURSE AT THE BORDER

I.

Much of the thinking and writing that I have done for this dissertation (especially for this conclusion) has been accomplished in and through my experience of borderland spaces, sites of displacement and places of struggle: from Brownsville, Texas to Ithaca, New York to Los Angeles, California. For this chapter, I return to Brownsville and the border to think about their intersections with discourses of urban revitalization. However, in writing about these ideas, I am informed by my recent experiences in downtown Los Angeles, witnessing the ongoing influx of private capital as this area of the city experiences its own so called revitalization. This experience of writing about the proposed revitalization of downtown Brownsville while simultaneously observing the gentrification of downtown L.A. from the very coffee houses and spaces that have resulted from this transformation has been somewhat awkward; in part, because of the resemblances between each context, but also because of my ability to move between these spaces. But, at the same time, it has also felt extremely appropriate to write in precisely this way: by allowing myself to acknowledge the sense of awkwardness and misplacement with/in

these spaces, I have been able to explore the social, political and geographic roots of those feelings while also being careful not to suggest a facile correspondence between them.

Though the current wave of gentrification in downtown L.A. has not demonstrated the same kind of massive displacement or destruction witnessed in "slum-clearance" types of urban renewal projects (such as the redevelopment of Bunker Hill in downtown L.A.), one can nonetheless sense the significant transformation taking place in the area. And it is a change that is uniquely registered through the differences in affective experiences that it has wrought. To simply say that the up-scaling of downtown L.A. is part and parcel of a change in the social and economic class of its inhabitants (i.e., its gentrification) does little to account for the affective dynamics at stake. As well as a change in the built environment and demographics of a neighborhood, gentrification is a complex interaction of feelings. In this chapter, then, I want to think not only about the social and political significance of the discourses surrounding the proposed revitalization of downtown Brownsville but also to suggest the significance of an approach informed by the concept of tenderness that I have developed throughout this dissertation.

II.

On Wednesday, September 22, 2010 a crowd of about 100

Brownsville residents, including university and high school students, city commissioners, firefighters and a local city booster with a small film crew, gathered on East Adams Street in downtown Brownsville for a rally to win a "main street makeover" contest sponsored by the producers of the Oprah Winfrey's popular talk-show (Ulloa). Local realtor Craig Grove and his team of supporters from the website and Facebook group "Brownsville Living" were the primary organizers of the rally, whose video recording they hoped to submit as part of their application to the "main street makeover" contest.[36] In a late August 2010 post to Winfrey's Facebook page, the show's producers ask potential contestants: "Is your hometown in need of a makeover? Has your hometown been struck with a hardship and let itself go?" The video produced from the rally in Brownsville hoped to convince the executives of *Oprah* that the city's downtown—long displaced as the primary site of economic activity and urban development—was the most deserving of a main street "facelift."

To be sure, no such "makeover" of any city was ever produced, though it is unclear exactly why or if any cities were ever selected to participate. Nonetheless, the participation of these Brownsville residents in this short-lived competition provides a provocative

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[36] In fact, the organizers of the rally in Brownsville took their inspiration from another Texas city whose residents were also submitting a video application to the makeover contest (Ulloa).

example of the discourses involved in attempts to revitalize city neighborhoods, especially those located in the historical urban cores. The ways in which such revitalization projects are initially imagined can be very useful in understanding the ultimate results of these transformations. In this particular case, the fact that a popular talk-show program would announce such a competition, using language typically associated with beauty or fashion makeovers, is in itself worthy of critical attention. Reality-based television programs like ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, TLC's *What Not to Wear* and Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* often present a narrative in which the superficial transformation (or makeover) of a person's fashion or home provides more than a mere change in the visual aesthetics of the given person or object of change;[37] the makeovers performed on these shows are intended to be experienced as deep and fundamental. For instance, a prominent theme in the episodes of *What Not to Wear* (which feature only women participants) is that of the woman whose ostensible lack of attention or care for her personal appearance is found to actually be tied to an underlying lack of self-

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[37] *Extreme Makeover* is a reality-based TV show that documents the total transformation of a family's home. *What Not to Wear* and *Queer Eye* both focus on "traditional" makeovers of individuals—focusing on a person's clothing fashion/style and make-up or personal grooming—although *Queer Eye* attempts to be more comprehensive by also providing consultation on things like interior design, cultural consumption and food.

esteem or some other form of poor psychological-emotional health. Thus, the show's hosts Stacy London and Clinton Kelly are often shown engaging in a pseudo-counseling session with their participants, encouraging them to address these issues through changes to their wardrobe. In these narratives, the participants' access to significant amounts of capital, vis-à-vis the show's producers, is taken for granted as a necessary requirement for such transformations. Thus, the narratives from these shows traffic in a highly consumerist ideology that simplifies the complex problems that people face as matters to be resolved through capital intensive superficial transformations that give the appearance of an easy fix.

The decision on the part of the *Oprah* show's producers to couch their efforts at civic revitalization in similar language suggests a significant problem in the ways that issues of urban planning and development are framed in/by popular discourse. To use the language of personal makeovers to describe the solutions to the economic distress or depression of the cities reduces the perception of the problem to a mere matter of appearances. Furthermore, the promotion of these makeovers as the result of a competition between various economically distressed neighborhoods seems to mirror a logic of scarcity that undergirds a neoliberal mode of governance. Instead of suggesting a collectivized strategy to address an obviously broadly

shared issue, the show's discourse perpetuates an intense strategy of individual investment and competition at the cost of generating a broad, more collective solution.

The brief, five-minute video that was produced for the contest submission and subsequently posted on YouTube, provides another important example of the discourses used to promote urban revitalization. The video begins with a somewhat over-determined, dramatic soundtrack building more suspense in the absence of any text or spoken words. There is a synth-like and distant quality to the sustained chords, along with some syncopated bass. Soon after, white text over a black background informs the spectator that "Brownsville is the second most historic city in Texas" and that while it was once a "bustling center of trade" made evident by its "abundance of beautiful well maintained historic buildings" it has, over time, fallen on hard times (Rogy Productions). This historical change of fortunes for the neighborhood is illustrated by a brief sequence of still photographs of downtown Brownsville in the 1940s and 50s that each slowly transforms into a film clip that document the same street corners from the older photographs, now in their contemporary state. In this transition, however, the on-screen narrative informs the viewer that "The march of time has not been kind to this critically important part of Texas and American heritage" (Rogy Productions). With this, the

spectator is made aware of the ways in which the "historic" grandeur of these buildings has given way to their present worn and deteriorated conditions. Again, the spectator is helped to understand this conclusion by another sequence of images of vacated and ill-maintained buildings. "With low household income levels," the video claims, "the dream of repairing and maintaining our historic downtown remains just that…Only a Dream." As the last frame's time runs out, the soundtrack begins to transition to the audio from the rally, with the crowd of residents chanting "Oprah, Oprah, Oprah." Suddenly, a new soundtrack comes through with an ensemble of acoustic guitars playing a driving rhythm, provoking a sense of forward motion. These changes in the soundtrack are meant to inspire hope and to pull on the viewers' heart strings. Where the preservation and maintenance of downtown Brownsville's historical structures seems possible only within the realm of dreams, it is the rhythmic chanting of a household celebrity's name that will suddenly bring hope.

The rest of the short video includes interviews with city commissioner Melissa Zamora, local university student Rolando Ocalas and local booster Craig Grove (who is credited as the video's director and whose organization "Brownsville Living" co-produced the video). In each interview, each subject references the neighborhood's

decline and the potential benefits of a downtown makeover. Ocalas, for instance, shares that "from all the stories that I hear about the past generations, this used to be the bustling center of the city" (Rogy Productions). "This was amazing," he continues, "and through the times it's fallen into decay." For Grove, the revitalization of downtown—through "more local businesses, more economic development, a cultural entertainment district"—would be part of an attempt to "re-establish" the town in order to compel the city's youth to stay. Making oblique references to the increase in violence between drug cartels and the Mexican army along the Mexico-U.S. border, through the mention of "negativity" and "positivity" associated with the region in the national press, Grove further hopes that the professional makeover promised by the contest would provide a level of positivity that would "really, really lift the spirits of the people." Thus, the expectations for a downtown makeover go beyond a superficial rehabilitation of deteriorating or outdated properties, but also entail a significant transformation of the social and economic life of the neighborhood.

In the narrative that the short film creates through these testimonies and through its own on-screen narration, it explains the neighborhood's deterioration and depressed economic state as the consequences of vague and abstract causes like time. As in many

other cities across the postwar U.S., Brownsville's downtown is a district with several historic buildings (some dating as far back as the late 19th-century) that speak to its former status as the center for commerce and public life. Decorative wrought-iron balconies, for example, evidence Brownsville's participation in a cultural and economic circuit that once linked the local economy and culture with New Orleans and other port cities along the Gulf of Mexico (Fox). Though it seems relatively clear that the deterioration that is referenced is measured by the general dilapidated appearance of the built environment and the apparent lack of significant cultural and economic activity, what remains occluded in this narrative are the causes for the current state. This kind of framing attributes a sense of "naturalness" to the neighborhood's state, where its conditions are understood as being free from human interference or influence. But this of course is precisely the kind of account of urban space (as natural, inevitable or existing outside of human social relations) that critical geography challenges through its focus on the role of political economic forces on the production of space.[38] To be sure, the general

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[38] See, for instance, Gilmore, Ruth. *Golden Gulags: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2007; Harvey, David. "The Right to the City." *New Left Review*. 53 (2008): 23-40; Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991; Smith, Neil. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press,

absence of capital and significant cultural activity in downtown districts (evidenced, especially by the poor maintenance of the built environment) is something that downtown Brownsville shares with many central city districts across the United States. In fact, the postwar development of suburban cities and neighborhoods was achieved primarily through a deliberate abandonment of downtown districts and neighborhoods by both private capital and state regulatory forces; a complex series of relationships that resulted in the significant devaluation of central urban districts (Ávila; Massey & Denton; Smith 1996). In other words, devalorization or deterioration are not simply natural results of the passage of time—as the video's narrative suggests—but are directly attributable to the agency of both state and market actors (Smith 1996, 62).

This misleading account of the state of affairs in downtown Brownsville is important for considering the ways in which the revitalization process is defined. By occluding the forces or actors responsible for the neighborhood's deterioration, this discourse not only absolves the responsible parties but more importantly performs the necessary groundwork, as it were, for revitalization. In other words, in order for any revitalization or renewal efforts to move forward, one must first declare the given neighborhood "dead" (and,

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1984; Soja, Edward. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Minneapolis: University of

thus, in need of resuscitation). However, by focusing on the deterioration of the built environment, revitalization boosters create a significant association between the physical environment and the social life within it such that the decline of the spatial coincides with a devalorization of the social. Given this, scholars like Ocean Howell, Neil Smith, Sharon Zukin and many others have observed that, within a contemporary urban context, "revitalization" has been a dirty word that implies much more than simply restoring or renovating the built environment.[39] In the mouths of urban developers and their supporters "revitalization" operates as a code word for gentrification—the displacement of poor and working class residents through the deliberate up-scaling of a neighborhood with low property values with the intent of attracting new, wealthier residents.[40] In the highly

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Minnesota Press, 2010; among others.

[39] See, for instance: Howell, Ocean. "The 'Creative Class' and the Gentrifying City: Skateboarding in Philadelphia's Love Park." *Journal of Architectural Education*. 32-42; Smith, Neil. "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy." *Antipode*. 34.3 (2002): 427-50; Barnes, Kendall, et al. "Community and Nostalgia in Urban Revitalisation: A Critique of Urban Village and Creative Class Strategies as Remedies for Social 'Problems'." *Australian Geographer*. 37.3 (2006): 335-54; Zukin, Sharon. *Naked City: The Life and Death of Authentic Urban Places*. Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 2010.

[40] "Gentrification," writes Smith, "is the process by which poor and working-class neighborhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters—neighborhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and a middle-class exodus" (1996, 32). "[F]or those impoverished, evicted or made homeless in its wake, gentrification is indeed a dirty word and it should stay a dirty word" (34).

racialized spatial context of the U.S., where people of color and immigrants are disproportionately represented in poor and working class neighborhoods,[41] the displacement that results from gentrification-through-revitalization tends to be experienced by these same communities. Thus, revitalization cannot be understood outside this social context; more than merely refurbishing a built environment, it functions as a way to transform the sociocultural and political life of a neighborhood.

To be sure, most supporters of urban revitalization projects do not openly tout the resulting displacement of existing residents and the existing cultural life in their arguments promoting such projects. Often, the displacement of these residents is explained as an unintended consequence of the redevelopment process. Nevertheless, one can still perceive more or less subtle hints about the gentrifying desires that animate urban revitalization projects. In *New Urban Frontiers: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, for instance, Neil Smith explains how a "frontier ideology"—one that functions to continually generate a distinction between the civil/uncivil or the savage/pioneer—pervades the discourses around urban redevelopment and gentrification in New York City in the 1980s (17-8).

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[41] See Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton's *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993.

Citing examples of frontier imagery and ideology from popular culture including marketing for designer fashion retailers like Ralph Lauren, as well as references to New York City's Lower East Side as "Indian country" and gentrifiers as "urban pioneers" in local news press accounts, Smith demonstrates that the framing of urban revitalization projects echoes patterns found in the displacement of Native Americans in the 19th century: "contemporary urban frontier imagery treats the present inner-city population as a natural element of their physical surroundings. The term 'urban pioneer' is therefore as arrogant as the original notion of 'pioneers' in that it suggests a city not yet socially inhabited; like Native Americans, the urban working class is seen as less than social, a part of the physical environment" (1996, xiv). Thus, what is always at stake in these processes of so called revitalization is the potential for displacing a community of people and the existing sociocultural order, as much as the transformation of its spatial form in favor of another.

This is also the case in Brownsville. While much of the discourse surrounding the proposals to revitalize the downtown speaks of the decay and deterioration in the built environment there is a relative paucity of references to potential changes to the social and cultural order of the neighborhood. Even within the language about the built environment, however, one can discern how this discourse functions

to effectively delegitimize or discursively erase the existing socio-spatial configuration: a landscape dominated by ropa usada (used clothing) stores, often selling clothes by the kilo, and other restaurants and shops that serve the mostly poor and working class visitors and nearby residents. This is a landscape that I first became particularly familiar with as a child, when my grandmother Herminia and her then husband Miguel would care for me and my cousins while our mothers worked or went to school. In the early and mid-1990s, they owned and operated a segunda (second-hand retail store) inside the historic Miguel Fernández Hide Yard building on Adams Street and 11th Street, with a small apartment unit in the back of the store. I have, therefore, participated to a limited extent in this community where Spanish is the predominant language; where people who can't afford the privilege of car ownership catch their bus at the downtown Metro bus station; where you can find cheap, imported wares and gifts; where several small diner-style "cafes" offer familiar Mexican dishes of carne guisada, tortillas de harina and caldo de res at affordable prices. With the exception of ropa usada stores, [42] neither of these aspects of the

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[42] In fact, these segundas (or ropa usada stores) are part of a list of "undesirable" businesses—including amusement arcades, blood or plasma centers, day care schools, payday lenders, check-cashing establishments, veterinary offices, strip clubs, etc.—that city commissioners hope to force out of downtown through a new ordinance that encourages certain types of businesses to operate in the neighborhood while barring others from opening within the newly-

existing cultural and economic scenes of the downtown are explicitly named as targets for displacement. However, it is clear from the visions of revitalization that they do not figure into such plans. Instead, they are an unnamed part of the "decay" and deterioration that the boosters seek to, they conflict with the proposed transformations. As one city resident writes in a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, regarding downtown Brownsville's potential:

> If the merchants would open their eyes, they would see nothing but dollar stores and ropa usada stores...but what you need are new stores with quality merchandise at reasonable prices to attract more shoppers. Right now, downtown caters mostly to the Mexican shoppers and not to the citizens of Brownsville or the [Rio Grande] Valley. (Abrego)

The writer's reference to "the Mexican shoppers" merits some attention. By associating this group of shoppers with the bleak description of the neighborhood and the quality of merchandise for sale, it is clear that the reference functions at the level of

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designated "entertainment district" (Clark). Although the ordinance does not authorize the eviction of unwanted businesses, Ramiro Gonzalez, the city's director of comprehensive planning, is confident that downtown revitalization will increase property values high enough to squeeze them out. "The only reason they're still there is the rent is so cheap. That's why you don't see ropa usadas out by the mall," he explains (qtd. in Clark). "The rent there is $1.20 a square foot."

socioeconomic class. As the writer makes clear, the state of the neighborhood's buildings is so intimately bound with the social-economic scene that it is unclear which, if any, is the primary problem: the state of the built environment or the class of people that inhabit and make use of it. This particular comment reveals the ways in which the dreams and visions of a "revitalized" downtown Brownsville articulate particular definitions of who and what constitutes cultural and economic vitality.

III.

In this chapter, I have written about how the *Oprah* show producers promoted a main street makeover contest that has particular ramifications for the ways in which people comprehend urban development as well as for the results of this process. The proposed contest engendered a neoliberal ideology of the city in that it promotes an intense competition among cities as a solution to their shared problems of economic distress even when it is clear that many seemed to face similar circumstances that might best be addressed through collective action. I have also explored how the video contest submission that was produced demonstrates a desire to change downtown Brownsville, not only in terms of its built environment but also significantly in terms of its social and cultural composition. The video is an example of the ways in which revitalization discourse

harbors an unacknowledged discussion of gentrification. Given this, do we simply write off the participants in the rally/video as ideological dupes? Are the boosters and producers of the contest video submission ideological villains who are secretly intent on getting rid of the poor, brown people in downtown Brownsville? What is the relation of tenderness to this?

Though I am concerned and hope to draw attention to the roles of language and stories in the production of space as they are played out in the context of downtown Brownsville, I certainly do not hope to produce a simplified understanding of the situation described above. What I want to do is to suggest that tenderness is important here in terms of the way in which I approach the very story I observe and weave as a scholar: I want to be tender with and/or towards the situation. I use tender here in the sense that I want to be careful not to become invested in creating a hard boundary between myself and the people and situations I am observing. This is similar to anthropologist Ruther Behar's account of mobilizing (rather than seeking to reduce) one's emotional vulnerability to her "objects" of study as an observational and writing method for social sciences (6, 13). Tenderness in this sense names a kind of scholarly-observational approach that seeks to maintain what Erin Gilson describes as an "epistemic vulnerability," an attitude or position acknowledging that

one may have much to learn from others and which is, in fact, necessary for the process of learning (93). My tenderness with/towards the situation described above means maintaining open (or maintaining myself open to) the possibility that I don't know it all.

This epistemic vulnerability is important for avoiding reproducing a sense or feeling of total knowledge and invulnerability, which, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, represents a political imperative. It recalls, in part, the comparisons in Chapter One between Héctor Tobar's narrative in *The Barbarian Nurseries* and Manuel Muñoz's *What You See in the Dark*, where tenderness is expressed as the degree of openness in the narrative engagement. Epistemic vulnerability, in fact, colors all of the fiction I have explored in this dissertation, which has shown that such an openness to others and their effects on one's understandings is critical as an ethical and political strategy.

In Los Angeles, New York City and other places, I have experienced the spaces of forced displacement and these experiences have often been a mixed bag of feelings. This is in part because of my awareness of these histories of gentrification as well as the fact that, as a person of color, I have not always been imagined as the ideal inhabitant or resident of these spaces. Walking through a space where I am not supposed to belong, or trying to inhabit one with the

knowledge of those that have been displaced from it, produces a complex interaction of feelings. So, too, does witnessing the efforts to significantly transform downtown Brownsville while acknowledging the ultimately incomprehensible complexity of the people and forces involved. As the examples of Latina/o fiction explored in this dissertation have shown, to be tender with/towards this situation also means to struggle (both with and for it). is through the writing of the authors explored in this dissertation, and those like them, that I feel more prepared to engage in my own forms of tender struggle with landscapes and geographies that are shaped not only by social and economic forces, but that are also significantly altered by the economic circulation of emotions and feelings around them. The encouragement offered by these writers to acknowledge and cultivate one's sense of tenderness as a way to appreciate the world and one's relations to it is of significant value to those that seek to understand the dynamic process of the social production of space, including processes of gentrification through revitalization. Thus, I would like to reiterate a claim first suggested in the Introduction: that the tenderness of these works of Latina/o fiction has much to offer to thinking about geography, affect and forms of struggle.

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